Transnational Low-Budget Productions

Thesis
presented to the Faculty of Arts
of
the University of Zurich
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by Seraina Rohrer
of Buchs SG

Accepted in the fall semester 2012 on the
recommendation of Prof. Dr. Margrit Tröhler and
Prof. Dr. Jens Andermann

Zurich, 2015

Abstract:
This dissertation examines a previously ignored group of films: the Mexican low budget productions (wrestling and border action films, antihero comedies, and sexy movies) made since the 1960s. Besides analyzing production and reception practices of Mexican low budget films, this dissertation particularly highlights the works of the performer María Elena Velasco (La India María), who is one of the main representative's of Mexican low budget films. Since her first appearance as an indigenous character in the 1970s, she is widely known and controversially discussed.

Abstract:
Die vorliegende Dissertation untersucht ein bis anhin unerforschtes Korpus an Filmen; die seit den 1960er Jahren produzierten mexikanischen Low-Budget-Filme. Analysiert werden Produktions- und Rezeptionspraktiken, wobei die Filme von María Elena Velasco (La India María) im Zentrum stehen. María Elena Velasco (La India María) gilt als eine der wichtigsten Vertreterinnen der Low-Budget-Produktionen und ihre Darstellung einer indigenen Frau führt seit ihrem ersten Auftritt in den 1970er Jahren zu kontroversen Reaktionen.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is dedicated to three family members who passed away during the writing stages: my Mexican-American host mother, Lilián Apaez Rios, who taught me to love Selena and Texan country music; my father, Andreas Rohrer, always a true rebel; and Verena Fisler, 'gramama', who never understood what my job consisted of. I will always remember them dearly.

Gratitude is due to many people who have helped me and offered their support along the way including: Jens Andermann, María Arbelaez, Adán Avalos, Rogelio Agrasánchez, Catherine L. Benamou, Jenny Billeter, Robert Blanchet, Natalie Böhler, Käthy and Walter Bretscher, Lisa Cartwright, Maricruz Castro Ricalde, Marvin D'Lugo, Sharon Federer, Joël Fisler, Rosa Linda Fregoso, José Manuel García Ortega, Leonardo García Tsao, Francisco Gaytán, Lisa Herzog, Nydia Herrera, Norma Iglesias Prieto, Francisco Javier Iribarren, Ingrid Kummels, Jesse Lerner, Iván and Goretti Lipkies, Abél Muñoz Henonin, Laimdota Mazzarins, Rosa Medina, Abel Muñoz Henonin, Jaime J. Nasser, Chon Noriega, Luz Orozco, David O'Grady, Simone Schaub, Marion Schnelle, Therese Steffen, Dolores Tierney, Fabiola Torres-Alzaga, Margrit Tröhler, María Elena Velasco, David Wilt and many others. I am very thankful for their suggestions and references, which, whether or not they are aware, have greatly enriched my research and writing.

Ill. 1: María Elena Velasco and myself on the set of her latest film LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA / THE DAUGHTER OF MOCTEZUMA (MX, 2012) by her son Iván Lipkies during the filming in May 2011. That day, an actor did not show up and therefore I ended up playing the part of an American ambassador.

Introduction

Living in Mexico and traveling across Latin America, I visited countless street markets and browsed through extensive selections of films at stands. Time and time again, I was amazed to come across Mexican films with titles I had never heard of and whose excessively colorful covers enticed me. Many of them reminded me of the VHS covers of B movies. But instead of depicting white heroes, they showed migrants crossing the border, sensual dancers in erotic poses, muscular wrestlers with shiny suits, or indigenous women performing clownish acrobatic routines. It seemed rather peculiar to me that although I taught classes on Latin American and Mexican cinema at the university, there were films I had not yet come across. Most vendors responded enthusiastically to my queries about the films, encouraging me to watch them. They backed up their recommendation with statements such as "*son muy fuertes*" (they are very intense), "*esa es muy chistosa*" (that one is hilarious) or "*son ídolos de los pobres*" (they are the idols of the poor). Few advised me to leave my hands off them, warning me that they were "*muy violentas*" (extremely violent), "*groseras*" (vulgar) or simply "*muy malas*" (very bad). Despite, or maybe because of the warnings, my interest was awakened and I began acquiring these — as yet mysterious — films. They would later become the corpus of films analyzed in this study.

As I was discovering these films I also began to look for the reasons they were excluded from the numerous books and papers I had read on Latin American, and in particular, Mexican cinema. It became clear that these films were generally not considered research-worthy and belonged to a period of Mexican film history that film critics refer to as '*la crisis*'. Between the late 1960s and the late 1980s during this so-called 'crisis', only a handful of Mexican films premiered in renowned international film festivals, even though the production volume had remained identical to the preceding years. During this period hundreds of films were produced aiming at a wide public in Mexico, across Latin America and the United States. However, critics and historians either ignored or condemned these films. They were viewed as void of artistic value, judged as merely commercial and accused of recycling stories that had proven to be successful at the box office. Behind this criticism clearly lies the assumption that filmic texts should be highly crafted, self-sufficient objects, worthy of respect through exhibition (in the form of festival participation) and preservation (in film archives). However, the films I encountered in street markets were the opposite. Their stories were recycled, the acting seemed wooden and the cinematic qualities poor, ranging from lighting to sound. Their covers bordered on kitsch and they came in plastic cases as pirated DVDs. Existing

primarily as commodities they were assimilated into the daily lives of ordinary people. Despite being rejected by critics, these films have, nevertheless, been watched extensively across Latin America. From the 1970s onward they were the big box office grossers attracting large audiences to the movie theaters. Even today they continue to be among the most popular videos at rental stores in neighborhoods inhabited by Latino migrants in the United States (Arbelaez 2001: 642). Many Latino families or migrant workers watch these films in their spare time, using them as a means to reflect on their own situation as immigrants. Most importantly, the viewing context itself significantly contributes to the ways viewers make sense of these films. Over time, lines of dialog became catch phrases and today some film quotes even circulate as ring tones for mobile phones.

Rooted in contradictions, my research interest in these films is twofold. First of all, it stems from the polarity of their reception, ranging from corrosive condemnations by film critics to manifold enthusiastic reactions by viewers in Mexico and throughout the Americas, both North and South. Secondly, such a lack of academic research invites further investigation and points to the need that film scholars recognize the gap in our understanding of Latin American film history. Clearly, a single research project as this one cannot sufficiently shed light on such an extremely broad range of films, their production and reception. For this reason I have narrowed my focus to a set of films staring a singular performer depicting the same unique character. Whether films or television shows, the works chosen for this study feature a clownish indigenous woman known as *La India María* (Maria, the Indian). The comedies' star María Elena Velasco not only portrays this now legendary character, but also directs and produces some of her films.

Velasco's films stand out from the rest with a female main protagonist and female director and producer, at the same time they remain typical of the larger historic period and are exemplary of Mexican cinema 'in crisis', not only in terms of production and distribution practices, but aesthetically, as well. While her films prove noteworthy examples of this much-ignored era of Mexican cinema, they have also triggered extremely varied and even highly contradictory responses characteristic of the period. To this day, Velasco's films and iconic character continue to occupy a controversial stance ranging from admiration to condemnation for their apparently 'racist' depictions of indigenous people. The character *India María* can either be seen as a repetition of a negative stereotype, or as the transgression of such, revealing and questioning its simplified depiction.

Ironically, María Elena Velasco's unique position in Mexico's male dominated film industry — as a female actress, director, and producer has been completely overlooked and therefore deserves a closer analysis. Through my investigation into Velasco's films, I have also discovered that almost no research has been conducted on comedies defined

by a central character like *La India María*, and that I will hereafter refer to as 'antihero comedies'.

By adopting a case-study approach for my research, I hope to avoid sweeping generalizations but provide, rather, an in-depth analysis of the main corpus of films, addressing questions ranging from production mode to various reception practices. By choosing this approach, I have positioned myself within the theoretical framework of production and reception studies, coming from a cultural studies angle. My aim is to re-evaluate a set of films from a new historical perspective while contributing to current discussion in film theory. Throughout this dissertation, I deliberately refrain from categorizing the films through the common lens of national or third world cinema, but situate them instead among current and global theoretical tendencies. Although my focus clearly lies on the chosen case study, I start of my research giving a general introduction to what critics have denounced as low quality Mexican films, their historical background, production mode, and an overview on circulation and exhibition. I am fully aware that this overview is rather general, however, I believe it provides a necessary framework to research such an overlooked corpus of films. Hopefully, future researchers will refine these findings.

Exploitation, B movies and Churros — Finding a Label

Among Spanish speakers, the terms *cine popular*, *churro*, and *naco* have been used to categorize or label the *India María* films and other so-called low quality Mexican movies. In the Anglo-American terminology, however, low budget films that share aesthetic characteristics are commonly labeled as B movies or considered as part of exploitation cinema. I am convinced that it is important to place my chosen corpus of films within the framework of existing terminology. For these purposes, I have investigated their respective definitions in order to determine the extent to which they are useful or relevant to my research. As a result, I state that all existing terms are misleading when describing my corpus, instead of adopting a pre-existing term, I introduce a new one: 'Mexican Formula Pictures'. This heading best describes not only the corpus, but the entire context of my study, as well. Significantly, this terminology points directly to the issues at stake for the films, their reception and place in the history of Mexican cinema.

The term *cine popular* (popular cinema) generically summarizes films that were and/or still are successful with moviegoers, from Mexico's Golden Age melodramas to the cheap productions of the 1960s and onwards. While the term had a positive connotation during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, it gradually shifted to a more negative understanding labeling the films of the so-called crisis. Also, in Mexico, films are commonly divided into 'popular' cinema for the masses (low art) and 'quality' cinema (high art). This division was introduced and heavily promoted by journalistic criticism during the 1970s and 1980s (Ricalde Castro 2004a: 195). In English the term 'popular'

commonly evokes the culture of the people as a sign of cohesion and social transformation (Shohat and Stam 1994: 340). Contrary to the English understanding of 'popular', the Spanish term is not rooted within the field of cultural studies. Due to the term's history, being understood in various ways, I refrain from labeling the films discussed in this dissertation *cine popular*.

Another term that is frequently employed to describe the films at stake is *churro*. A *churro* is a deep-fried pastry, which has become a popular snack, produced in Latin America and around the world and sold by fast-food chains such as *Taco Bell* or *Del Taco* in the United States. Labeling films as *churros* refers to the high speed and low cost of the pastry's manufacturing (García Riera 1998: 151). Additionally, all *churros* are said to look and taste the same — characteristics also attributed to the films. Like the term *cine popular*, *churro* is not exclusively used to describe low-budget Mexican films with low production values, but is employed in a broader sense. However, all uses of this word are derogatory and bear culturally determined and overtly negative connotations, implying that the films have little, if any, cultural value. This is not uncommon; popular texts are often discursively linked to base pleasures such as sex and, as in this case, food. They are also often labeled as 'sugary' or 'cloying' (Fiske 1995: 121, 22). Significantly, Mexican-American film scholar Adán Avalos points out that the term *churro* is predominantly employed by Mexico's elites to degrade or deride films consumed by the lower classes. Avalos, one of the few scholars who contributed to the research on low-budget border films, was himself born into a family of migrant workers. He has analyzed the role of border films in the migrant community, suggesting to rehabilitate the term *naco* originally a slur against Indians, peasants, or simply people with a provincial background.

Today, *naco* (arrogant), the third Spanish term relevant to Mexican Formula Pictures generally refers to attitudes, values and tastes of the lower classes. In recent years, the term has been reclaimed by the migrant community in its positive sense (Avalos 2009: 187). *Naco* cinema, according to Avalos, is a transnational cinema reflecting the identity of Mexicans who recently immigrated to the United States (Avalos 2009: 187). Like *churro*, *naco* centers on questions of taste; it also implies a certain positioning *vis-à-vis* cultural products — in this case appreciative. Although the term *naco* might be appropriate when used by a researcher from within the migrant community, it would be highly problematic for a Swiss scholar such as myself to employ it. I am neither a community member nor do I wish to approach the films by making premature assumptions about their meaning and their appropriation as objects of pride. Furthermore, all the aforementioned terms *cine popular*, *churro*, and *naco* don't take into account questions about how the movies are made or how they are screened. Because the aim of my study is to emphasize all areas of cinematic practice (production, distribution and exhibition) it therefore makes little sense to use terms that would likely lead to confusion or misunderstandings.

Would it make sense, however, to operate with terms commonly employed in an Anglo-American or international context? When looking at these films, one cannot avoid comparing them to 'B movies' and exploitation cinema. Films labeled as American B movies clearly share similarities with the films analyzed in this study. Both are marked, for instance, by low production values; scripts are often recycled, production times are extremely short and production costs are minimal. Furthermore, similarities in the exhibition of American B movies and Mexican Formula Pictures also exist. Both were and are still usually shown as double bills and advertised as two films for the price of one. Despite their shared characteristics, major differences exist between them as well. B movies are associated with a particular historical era. They emerged during the Great Depression in the 1930s and were produced in Hollywood (Taves 1993: 313). As their name indicates, B movies are defined in opposition to A movies which were produced by the main industry studios (or A studios) with extensive means (Taves 1993: 314). The Mexican pictures I am analyzing in this dissertation were produced later, between the late 1960s and the late 1980s. Moreover, there was no such division in Mexico between an A and B industry. Low-budget films were the main output of the industry at the time. To label the corpus of films treated here, as B movies would conflate two very different contexts.

For similar reasons, to categorize Mexican films produced during *la crisis* as 'exploitation cinema' would also be problematic. The concept of exploitation cinema is clearly rooted in the United States. Film scholar Eric Schaefer situates the exploitation practices within the 'classical' Hollywood era between 1919 and 1959, which allows him to bring out aesthetic features as well as characteristics in production, distribution, and exhibition (Schaefer 1999: 4–6). Although the films analyzed in this dissertation share various characteristics with the classical exploitation films described by Schaefer, I refrain from using the term here for various reasons. Unlike their neighbors up north, there is no 'exploitation' category in Mexican film production. Furthermore, the notion of low-budget needs to be carefully reconsidered, as most films in Latin America and Mexico are produced cheaply; filmmaking in Latin America operates on a different scale that cannot be compared to U.S. and European standards. Significantly, not all Mexican low-budget films were aimed at 'mature' audiences. Censorship regulations did not control Mexican cinema to the same extent as in the United States. Even though American exploitation films emerged as an alternative mode to the mainstream industry productions, unlike their Mexican counterparts, they were still regulated by a variety of censorship measurements (Ruétalo and Tierney 2009: 4; Schaefer 1999: 136–64).

Moreover, exploitation has become a broad term in recent years, stressing the exploitative treatment of almost any theme. Generally, it underscores the film's (and/or filmmakers') intent to exploit specific subjects or affects. Movies with explicit sexual content, for example, are commonly known as 'sexploitation'. 'Blaxploitation' is

another term often used today to describe a genre of cheap action films featuring an African American cast and exploiting racial stereotypes.[1] Interestingly, the term 'mexploitation' has also been used to imply a degradation of Mexican culture (Greene 2005, 2007).

On Schaefer's cue and for all the reasons outlined in this introduction, I have rejected the idea of certain topics being 'exploitative' per se and have looked, instead, for another terminology, which would allow me to avert the reader's preliminary judgment of Mexican Formula Pictures, especially those constituting the corpus of this study. Despite my refusal to use the term, I admit that the first part of this dissertation is strongly influenced by Schaefer's (1999) grid which, as mentioned above, investigates American exploitation cinema within historically determined designations focusing on production, distribution and exhibition, advertising, and style. Schaefer's reflections on methodological issues have helped me a great deal since, despite the differences, many of the problems encountered in his research are, nevertheless, comparable to mine.

Though I recognize it would not be farfetched to label the low-budget films analyzed in this study as exploitation, *cine popular*, *churro*, *naco* or even B movies, I have opted against it in order to avoid placing them within a predetermined framework often judged as low quality. The categorization of films into 'good' (high art) and 'bad' (low art) must be questioned and these value-based attributions have to be carefully analyzed within their context. It would be foolhardy, however, to deny that aspects of films presented in this dissertation are marked with negative connotations. These concern the films' aesthetic qualities, their content, the exhibition at 'second-class' movie theaters and even their production mode. To avoid terms such as poorly crafted, bad, lowbrow, or low quality — which automatically discredits these films — I use the term 'Formula Pictures'. While 'Formula' combines the recurring characteristics of the films, their production and exhibition practices outlined in Part I, the term 'Picture' alludes to the different formats ranging from film to television series and straight-to-video productions. Together, the terms imply a determined historical framework ranging roughly from the late 1960s and the late 1980s, during which Mexican Formula Pictures were predominantly produced and first released. To structure the collection of countless films and variety of themes, I divide Mexican Formula Pictures into four thematic categories: wrestling films, sexy movies, border adventure films, and antihero comedies.

[1] In recent years, blaxploitation has repeatedly come the subject of academic research. Besides more general introductions by authors such as Howard (2008) or Walker et al. (2009), many papers center on aspects of race in relation to their audience (Benshoff 2000; Kraszewski 2002; Lawrence 2008; Sévéon 2008) or on aspects of gender (Holmlund 2005; Keeling 2007; Sims 2006).

Literature Review

The films from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1935 to the late 1940s) or more recent works from the 1990s onwards have repeatedly become the subject of academic research. Mexican Formula Pictures, on the other hand, have been widely overlooked or more accurately, "deliberately ignored", as American film scholar Sergio De La Mora suggests (2009: 247).[2] As a result, prior research on the series of *India María* films by Velasco, the primary focus of my study, is nearly inexistent. The lack of interest among film scholars in Mexican cinema of this period stems, most likely, from their label as low quality films. In addition, this association could be attributed in part to the double role of Mexican film critics, who often also worked as researchers and viewed themselves as 'spokespersons' promoting certain cinematic styles and/or tendencies. With few exceptions, Mexican critics and scholars gave high praise to films of the Golden Age and the 1970s. During the Golden Age, Mexican Cinema was internationally successful, winning prizes in renowned international film festivals. Significantly, in the 1970s some scholars were able to make their own films, which they then praised in their reviews, while overtly denigrating the majority of films released between 1960 to the late 1980s.

Only recently have Mexican Formula Pictures become the subject of academic research, in studies led mostly by Anglo-American scholars. However, to this date less than a handful of books mention Mexican Formula Pictures, and few articles are exclusively dedicated to them. In this dissertation I try to frame this era of Mexican cinema in a new light and hopefully contribute to a growing interest in this emerging area of film studies. I will now briefly outline the main histographical influences on my research for this study.

Charles Ramírez Berg was among the first Anglo-American scholars to explore the period of Mexican cinema from the 1960s to the late 1980s. In *Cinema of Solitude* (1992), Ramírez Berg suggests that the films of this period belong to three different categories: prestige, problem, and popular films, each offering its own answers to the question of what constitutes Mexican national identity. Ramirez Berg illustrates how aspects of gender and family are closely related to the concepts of national identity promoted by the state.

A significant scholarly influence for my research, is Mexican visual anthropologist Norma Iglesias and in particular three of her publications which I will now list in full.

[2] For publications on the Golden Age era see Noble (2005), Mora (2005), Monsiváis (1999). Acevedo-Muñoz (2003) focuses on the work of director Buñuel. For particular focus on gender aspects see Hershfield (1996, 2001). For contemporary filmmaking see Haddu (2007), Wood (2006), González Vargas et al. (2006). For an overview of the broader Latin American context see Shaw (2007), Shaw and Dennison (2005), or Stock (1997). For an overview on Mexican Film history consult the collection of essays edited by Paranaguá (1995).

The first example, written as early as 1991 in Spanish, is her book *Entre yerba, polvo, y plomo: lo fronterizo visto por el cine mexicano* (Between Herbs, Dust and Plumb: the Border in Mexican Cinema). Through this seminal study of the field from a Mexican perspective, Iglesias gains recognition and the books release is followed by two English language publications of her research: First, in 1999 her article *Reconstructing the Border: Mexican Boder Cinema and its Relationship to Its Audience* and, finally, in 2003 a second essay, *Border Representations, Border Cinema and Independent Video*, is published. In her book *Entre yerba, polvo y plomo: lo fronterizo visto por el cine mexicano* (1991), Iglesias analyses a large corpus of Mexican films, centering on stories set in — or closely related to — the border region. She offers a definition of the border film: the plot — or a significant part of it — unfolds on the U.S./Mexican border; the film itself presents characters living in that region and is also often produced in the border region; finally, the story deals with Mexicans living in the United States and the ensuing cultural clashes (Iglesias 1999: 234). In her study, Iglesias also observes that the majority of border films have become known for their cheap look combined with a high level of popularity. However, like Mexican critics, her judgment of the Mexican Formula Pictures is highly negative. She denies them any cultural value and condemns the often violent and sexist plots, along with the stereotypical characters they depict.

Film scholar Doyle Green (2005) published his book *Mexploitation Cinema: A Critical History of Mexican Vampire, Wrestler, Ape-man, and Similar Films, 1957–1977* dedicated to the analysis of wrestling and vampire films which, like Ramírez Berg, centers on questions of national identity[3], albeit from a different angle stressing the role of labor. The next year, De La Mora also looks at Mexican Formula Pictures to explain his claims about national identity in relation to gender and sexuality in his book *Cinemachismo* (2006). Soon after, In *Drugs, Thugs and Divas* (2008) scholar Hugo Benavides goes on to examine the relationship between *telenovelas* and identity constructions across South-America.

Following this wave of attention to Mexican and Latin American cinema, is one of the most significant contribution to my research: the collection of essays *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America* (2009) edited by Dolores Tierny and Victoria Ruétalo. Though this publication is not exclusively about Mexican Formula Pictures, it sheds light on similar films across all of Latin America. From a myriad of theoretical stances the various authors featured in the collection raise questions ranging from the aesthetic value, to political and industrial issues. Significantly, the majority of essays in *Latsploitation* focus on Mexican cinematography reflecting the country's leading role

[3] Many authors dedicate their research to aspects of the border in respect to identity (Adler et al. 2007; R. R. Alvarez 1995; Anzaldúa 1987; Biemann 2002; Campell 2005; Carrasco and Cull 2004; Castillo 2002; Davis 2006; Everett 2004; Fojas 2006, 2008; C. F. Fox 1996; C. Fox 1999; Gómez-Peña 2001; R. Gutiérrez 1996; Martínez-Zalce 2003; O'Connor and Rollins 2005; Saldívar 1997; Saldívar-Hull 2002; Torrans 2002; Vaquera-Vásquez 1998).

within Latin America in this field. Three of the essays are dedicated to aspects of border culture between the United States and Mexico: The Chicano scholar Adán Avalos illustrates how border films bring concerns of many Mexican immigrants living in the United States to the screen; while the feminist media scholar Catherine Benamou and De La Mora each focus on the public image of two Mexican actresses famous for their appearances in sexy movies or border adventures. In short, the edited volume *Latsploitation* significantly enriches the panorama of Latin American film studies by exploring popular forms from a variety of theoretical stances — not only aspects of national identity.

An earlier study that contributes to my research comes from one of the *Latsploitation* publishers, the English film scholar Dolores Tierney. Together with Andrew Syder, she explores the transnational circulation of Mexican wrestling films *Importation/Mexploitation; or, How a Crime-Fighting, Vampire-Slaying Mexican Wrestler Almost Found Himself in an Italian Sword-and-Sandals Epic* (2005). A very useful research tool is also provided by yet another film historian David Wilt, who published a chronicle of Mexican film production, including all films from 1916 up to 2004 (2004). The same holds true for his online publication *The Mexican Film Bulletin*, which pays particular attention to popular films. While the film historian Carl J. Mora's *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1986–2004* (2005) offers a rather generic overview on Mexico's film history, Mora briefly introduces some of the films discussed in this dissertation. Similarly, *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers* (1999), edited by film scholar Joanne Hershfield and David Maciel, sheds light on different historical moments of Mexico's film history, without paying particular attention, however, to Mexican Formula Pictures.

Much general research exists on the border region, in which many Mexican Formula Pictures take place. The border between the U.S. and Mexico is the most frequented worldwide and has become emblematic through its representation in the media, by the activists and journalists as well as artists and filmmakers. The risks, hopes and adventures involved in border crossings from the 'poor' South to the 'rich' North have become iconic subjects of countless songs, books, short stories, poems and of course films ranging from Westerns to documentaries, music clips, art videos, etc. all of which have also generated a considerable amount of scholarly research in different academic fields.

Not surprisingly, most contributions to the study of the U.S.-Mexican border are by Chicano scholars (Mexican American Studies). Chon A. Noriega, for instance, has made an extensive study on art representing the border and its cultural implications of the region's in-between-ness, including artistic expression emerging as hybrid forms (Noriega 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1996, 2000b, 2000a, 2001, 2003). Interesting for the purposes of this study is Rosa Linda Fregoso's research which foregrounds gender

representations in depictions of border-crossings (Fregoso and Iglesias 1998; Fregoso 1999, 2001, 2003). Other important contributions to the field are summarized in *The Chicana/Chicano Cultural Studies Reader* (2006) or almost a decade earlier, in *Culture Across Borders* (1998) by David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobek. In addition to the aforementioned research projects, numerous books, chapters, and journal articles have been published on questions of representation relevant to border crossing experiences. For instance, Camilla Fojas publishes *Border Bandits, Hollywood on the Southern Frontier* (2008) exploring the image of bandits in American Westerns. However most scholarship is limited to research on American Hollywood productions or art films.

Some Chicano scholars have also published articles on low-budget films directed and produced by Chicanos (Americans of Mexican decent), which bear similarities to their Mexican counterparts. Christine List, for example, deals with aspects of self-stereotyping in the films of Cheech Marín (1992), a famous comedian of Mexican decent and Chon Noriega (2001) analyses the story and aesthetics of the film BORN IN EAST L.A. (Cheech Marin, US, 1987).

Regardless of the considerable attention given to Latin American Cinema as a whole and Mexican cinema in particular, to this date, scholars have only, on rare occasions, considered Mexican Formula Pictures research worthy, particularly the ones residing within Mexico. Much to the contrary, in *La Disolvencia del cine mexicano* (Dissolution of the Mexican Cinema) (1991), for example, Mexican journalist and film scholar Jorge Ayala Blanco overtly expresses his despise towards these films, a sentiment which he outlines in various of his early publications (Ayala Blanco 1986). The later works of the historian Emilio García Riera are less polemic and provide an overview of data on film productions covering different historical periods and genres (García Riera 1998). Even more recently, scholar Alvaro Fernández Reyes (2004) has finally proposed to consider wrestling films, in particular their main hero, *El Santo*, as a phenomenon of modernity. To this date, the stars of Mexican Formula Pictures — with the exception of *El Santo* — have not yet been the main subjects of any publication. The same holds true for the primary object of my research the main character and persona behind the films of *La India María*.

Even though no publications currently exist which focus on María Elena Velasco's contribution to Mexican cinema either as a performer, director or producer, there are however, three researchers who have dedicated aspects of their study to her work. Even before the turn of the century, the chicano scholar Carmen Huaco-Nuzum (1992) looks into the representation of the character *La India María* in one of her own and most popular films NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ / NEITHER FROM HERE, NOR FROM THERE (María Elena Velasco, MX, 1988). Much later the literature scholar Carol Clark D'Lugo (2008) analyses processes of identity construction by comparing the famous Mexican comedic persona *Cantinflas*, the wrestler *El Santo* and *La India María*. In her study, Clark

D'Lugo defends Velasco's portrayal of *La India María*, affirming that she has stayed truthful to a character defined by marginality in class, gender and ethnicity. At around the same time, film scholar Marícruz Castro Ricalde writes several short texts on *La India María*, not all of which have been published (Ricalde Castro 2004b, 2007). Castro Ricalde turns to Velasco in order to analyze how migrant workers used the *India María* films in their lives (2004a). Following in their tracks, I myself have published three articles on Mexican Formula Pictures and the *India María* films (Rohrer 2009a, 2009c, 2011). In these preliminary texts I carve out my initial ideas, and begin my process to deepen and develop a comprehensive understanding of my subject, allowing me to build the terms and concepts on which the foundations of this study are set.[4]

Researching Mexican Formula Pictures

In the beginning, the scarcity of publications made my research endeavor seem all the more appealing. I was driven by a strong desire to contribute to the reevaluation of Mexican Formula Pictures and their audiences. However, it soon became clear that the general lack of information on the subject made my undertaking more difficult. The research questions emerging from this dilemma forced me to position myself within and between distinct theoretical frameworks, namely reception and production studies, each one requiring it's own methodology.

But the very first challenge was to define what films would comprise the corpus of my study. It was evident that all sixteen *India María* feature films as well as her TV-shows played a significant role. The question remained concerning which works from the other Mexican Formula Pictures should also be included. In order to avoid leaving out something of importance, as had been done by so many scholars before me, I began by compiling a comprehensive list of films that seemed to correspond to the defining criteria of Mexican Formula Pictures. After watching nearly one hundred films, television series, and straight-to-video productions — some of them almost identical in story and style — it became necessary to limit my selection. In order to provide some insight I chose works, which where, to varying extents, exemplary of the wider assortment of Mexican Formula Pictures, leaving out films that were nearly identical in plot and aesthetic. In the end, the selection of films for my research was made according to the following criteria: films that were exceptionally successful at the box-office, on video, or DVD at the time of their release (immediate success); titles that were recommended time and again by street vendors, taxi drivers, auto mechanics, undocumented workers, friends, gardeners, cleaning personnel, as well as fans in Mexico and the United States (long run success with viewers). In addition, I have included and given some attention to films that have been the subject of scholarly papers (resonance with academia).

[4] All of the aspects are also integrated in this dissertation, although I did specify and slightly amend some of my hypothesis in the course of my research.

Having determined the films relevant to this study, I was confronted with a new series of problems particularly in Part I, in which I reconstruct circumstances under which Mexican Formula Pictures were produced. First and foremost, the lack of reliable sources was a serious drawback. Specific and detailed information necessary for my study on Mexican Formula Pictures were scarce or inexistent at Mexican film archives. The few existing publications would only allow me to complete a partial reconstruction of production and exhibition practices. I had to find a way to obtain this information somehow and decided it was safest to collect information from a variety of sources. This turned out to be a long and intense process. Most importantly, I determined which producers, distributors and exhibitors were still accessible. I then set up interviews and collected as much data on the films as I could. At first, interviewees were surprised that a Swiss researcher would be interested in Mexican Formula Pictures. Most of them viewed these works solely as entertainment that was not worth archiving. Hence, the records they had kept were scarce. The interviews proved, nevertheless, highly interesting and somewhat informative.

Rogelio Agrasánchez, the son of a prolific Mexican Formula Picture producer, was an exception to the rule. To my delight, Agrasánchez had collected all of his father's production files in a private archive in South Texas. This material, and Agrasánchez himself, turned out to be an invaluable resource, providing me with a deeper understanding of Mexican Formula Pictures. Another indispensable source was the artist María Elena Velasco herself, as well as her two children Iván Lipkies and Goretti Lipkies, and their former secretary Nydia Herrera, all of whom I interviewed several times. I was also lucky enough to be invited to visit the set of Velasco's latest movie, LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA / THE DAUGHTER OF MOCTEZUMA, shot in 2011, produced by her daughter Goretti and directed by her son Iván. Even though I went to the shooting as an 'objective' observer I ended up playing the part of an American ambassador when the actor originally cast in the role did now show up. This and other experiences on and off set were highly illuminating and I was able to integrate some of my newfound insight into my research. Of course, I had to rely heavily on oral testimony, due to the lack of sufficient written documentation. Regardless of my commitment to assemble dependable data in a methodical way, interestingly, in the end, some of the most valuable information was offered in the least formal setting, during breaks or at a casual dinner.

To reconstruct production and exhibition practices, I also drew from sources within Mexico's film industry, particularly the trade journal *Camara*. The journal considers itself an objective observer, always monitoring the industry's most relevant aspects (Camara 1987c: 1). However, it must be stressed that *Camara* clearly defends the mainstream industry. Throughout its existence the journal has voiced the concerns, publishing speeches held at conferences as well as letters addressed to the film industry

by opinion leaders. It is not out of character for the publications to have a self-congratulatory tone, lacking self-criticism. Keeping this bias in mind, the publications are, nonetheless, of great value to my research on the wider historical period and general practices of Mexican Formula Pictures. Foremost, it helped me to gain insight into distribution and exhibition practices common at the time.

Some of my research is also based on a selection of newspaper articles that, in some cases, provide a rich source of information on production, distribution, and exhibition practices. In dealing with both newspapers and trade papers, however, I was surprisingly confronted with the problem of contradictory information between different publications, depending on the particular publishers' stance. As it turns out, the different political regimes in power at this period of Mexican cinema determined what information could be published. Figures regarding production volume as well as other crucial data varied to such a large extent that these sources had to be evaluated critically and put into perspective.

In addition, since this study does not limit itself to production and exhibition practices, but suggests also the interdependence between production, exhibition, and reception, I needed to support the research with contemporary and theoretical references on the nature of spectatorship. To this date, spectators in film studies are often understood as a theoretical construct. However, through the process of my research I have gradually come to discover the difficulties such a definition entails, because viewers reacted individually to these films. Spectators and their receptions are not exclusively determined by the text but by different other factors instead, such as context and paratext. This means, I was unexpectedly confronted with manifold reception practices and their variations between viewers. For that reason, I had to acknowledge that a single theoretical approach failed to encompass the full scope of my findings. Hence, I decided to widen my theoretical framework and draw from both the field of cultural studies and semio-pragmatics and their respective approach to spectatorship.

To accompany the theoretical base of my research, I began to apply an investigative work method hoping to grasp the complexity and full spectrum of the reception practices I was observing among actual viewers. My methodology could be described as a continuous exploration of data through interviews and press clippings, data analysis, data interpretation, and hypothesis revision. This method is at its core drawn from ethnographic content analysis applied in sociological studies (Altheide 1987: 67ff.). For the most part, in order to gather new insights into reception practices, I worked only with qualitative data instead of quantitative. This allowed me to understand interviewee's motivations and the variations in reception. As it turned out, the questions driving my research required that I gather information that could, in the end, only be ascertained through interviews or press clippings. Again, having started my research using standardized and semi-standardized interviews, I soon realized their restrictive

effect. My hypothesis and questions often seemed to limit answers and did not capture the range of alternative practices. Hence, I chose to conduct mainly non-standardized conversations that allowed me to discover unforeseen aspects and gain additional insights.

This newfound approach led me to yet another difficulty concerning the interview situation itself. At first, I tried to recruit interviewees through organizations and businesses such as farm workers' unions, etc. However, after only a few interviews, I realized that the interviewees felt uncomfortable and only gave rudimentary answers. I can only speculate about the reasons for their discomfort: In all likelihood they felt like 'objects' of investigation; to make matters worse, they were being examined by a 'white' researcher; and were subjected to the scrutiny of a European female at that.[5] It also might be that they felt ashamed of the films, which to this date remain denigrated as products with low cultural value. It was impossible to know for sure.

In order to overcome these differences and difficulties, I adjusted my method of gathering data once again. Instead of conducting scheduled interviews in a confined room, I went out into the field and interviewed taxi drivers, market vendors, hairdressers, cleaning personnel, teachers etc.[6] I also began each conversation by explaining that I believed these films were interesting and valuable objects of research. I am convinced that these amendments to my methodology were crucial in moving the work forward. Immediately, interviewees engaged more fully, taking a stance for or against the films and even, at times, explaining why they simply did not care for them. I believe that my affirmative statement at the beginning of the interviews was particularly important to the people who liked the films but were, at first, reluctant to show their enthusiasm. I am fully aware that this approach bears the risk of eliciting more positive responses. Similarly, the data gained from interviews asking people to remember their past experience of viewing conditions seemed to create a tendency to idealize times gone by. The same holds true for those viewers commenting on *India María* clips seen more recently on YouTube. Their comments are, for the most part, either extremely positive or highly negative.

Unlike the complex nature of interviews, the accompanying analysis of the press clippings did not cause any difficulties but proved, rather, to be a rich source for

[5] I do not want to speculate about possible effects since this would require an in-depth analysis. However, it is clear that although I have lived in both Mexico and the United States — the two territories where I researched receptions — I come from a different background than the people who watch the *India María* films.

[6] More precisely, I interviewed people on both sides of the border, in Mexico and the United States. In total, I interviewed 7 taxi drivers (MX), 4 hairdresser (3 US/1 MX), 5 market women (MX), 3 teachers (US), 2 library clerks (US), 4 cleaning personnel (2 US/2 MX), 3 farm workers (US), 2 gardeners (1 MX / 1 US). The interviewees were all approximately between 25 and 60 year old, all of them of Mexican descent.

criticism of the *India María* films. Nevertheless, I did not wish to overestimate the press clippings since they are limited to only one mode of reception, namely, the critical one. Significantly, the methodological issues that arose in my research process prove that the tension involved in spectatorship between actual viewers and theoretical spectators, can never be clearly defined in stable relationship, but requires, instead, an interpretative process marked by constant negotiation and re-negotiation. It is therefore no surprise that I needed to adjust my methods according to the needs and strategies of my research design as it progressed. Despite the drawbacks of a less 'objective' approach combined with the difficulty in mediating the ever shifting processes of spectatorship, I still believe that in order to make claims about reception it is necessary to strongly rely on the testimony of individual viewers. With this in mind, the ultimate aim of my study on the reception of the *India María* films became to consolidate responses from viewers and draw general conclusions on the reception of these films by the public, including Mexicans from a wide spectrum of society: across gender, ethnicity, class, and residential status.

Overview

The broader aims of this dissertation are manifold. First, it attempts to reconstruct a historical period in Mexican cinema defined by a specific production and exhibition mode. Secondly, it presents a case study of *India María* films performed, directed and produced by María Elena Velasco whose opus situates her within the domain of the Mexican Formula Pictures industry. Thirdly, it investigates the various modes of reception and ways of watching the *India María* films practiced by viewers in both Mexico and the United States. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes an emerging vantage point for criticism, participating in the assertion that Mexican Formula Pictures be considered part of Mexico's rich cinematic heritage and as important artifacts of Mexican popular culture.

The dissertation is organized into four parts. Part I is an overview written particularly for readers who are not yet familiar with Mexican Formula Pictures. In this section, I present an introduction to the films, television shows, and straight-to-video productions, which make up the corpus of my study. These films are then organized into four thematic categories: wrestling films, sexy movies, border action adventures, and, finally, antihero comedies — to which the *India María* films belong. For each category I outline the standard plot structure, list one or several important examples, and introduce at least one renowned star performer. I then proceed to reconstruct the political context under which the films were produced through an analysis of the different political regimes' policies, their respective interpretations and practices. Particular attention is paid to Mexico's economic situation and censorship regulations. In Part I, I also examine how Mexican Formula Pictures were produced, analyzing both production costs and labor practices. I identify three important developments: First, Mexican Formula Pictures are produced by television companies; second, by family

businesses; and third, by Mexican producers who immigrated to the United States. Mexican Formula Pictures are not only unique in the way they are produced, but also differ in their distribution and exhibition. Having established the context for production, I then reconstruct the various exhibition practices in Mexico and the United States, paying attention to the differences between viewing films in theaters or on the small screen on television. This overview of the context, production, and exhibition of Mexican Formula Pictures is followed, finally, by an introduction to my case study: María Elena Velasco. Her artistic persona, the character of *La India María,* and the body of her work as a whole is introduced and situated within the historical context of Mexican Formula Pictures.

Part II centers on the various issues involved in the reception of the *India María* films, my case study. Here, I sketch out different kinds of reception modes of these films based on answers from interviewees, online user comments, press clippings, statements by the performer, and theory. Conversely, I examine how the *India María* films address spectators through the combination and repetition of story formulas in connection with the display of attractions. I continue by looking at ways in which the character's ethnicity is appropriated, followed by an in-depth analysis of the importance of gender in the reception process. Yet another key issue revolves around receptions of the films within the context of diaspora. Even the corrosive judgments of the *India María* films by film critics can be interpreted as a gesture of appropriation. Lastly, and perhaps the most obvious form of reception occurs with the many viewers who have watched *India María* films simply to be entertained.

Having identified the various negotiations involved in the reception of the *India María* films, and taking into account the limits of my research, I am able to draw some general conclusions on the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures in Part III of this dissertation. The ultimate aim of this part is to present a grid for further research in the field. To begin with, I argue that spectators' backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, gender or social status play a pivotal role in the reception process. Secondly, Mexican Formula Pictures are to be considered as filmic texts that trigger multifaceted receptions similar to the 'producerly' texts in John Fiske's sense of the term (Fiske 1995). Particular attention is paid to the combination of story formulas and lengthy, over-the-top display of spectacle, which I compare to Tom Gunning's concept of 'cinema of attraction' and the ways these films address spectators (Gunning 1986). Also, the conflation of star performers and characters in Mexican Formula Pictures influences the reception process, notably, what spectators make of the artists on- and off-screen images. Here again, my understanding of the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures not only implies the ways in which films address viewers, but also takes into account other factors such as the viewing contexts and the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse framing Mexican Formula Pictures and how strongly they can determine the ways spectators appropriate films in their daily lives. In line with the current state of research, I argue that it is the interplay

of numerous factors involved in reception processes — whether individual or institutional, be they emphasized or overlooked — whereby meaning is negotiated. With this in mind, I present a grid of four negotiated modes of reception for Mexican Formula Pictures.

Finally, in Part IV, I briefly outline what has become of Mexican Formula Pictures today. I postulate that new forms have emerged from this obscured and undervalued period in Mexican cinema. In particular, I draw parallels between Mexican Formula Pictures and the films of the Texan director Robert Rodriguez such as his unexpected early success of EL MARIACHI (MX/US, 1992) or more recently MACHETE (US, 2010). Rodriguez's films clearly bear the characteristics of Mexican Formula Pictures in terms of style, production mode and reception and they are today part of mainstream cinema.

Part I: Mexican Formula Pictures

Most Mexican Formula Pictures discussed in the realm of this dissertation have circulated primarily within Mexico's and Latin America's working class, and among Latinos in the United States. To this date, they are generally not distributed within common circuits in the United States or Europe. Only some of the films are available on DVD. Because of the lack of distribution, I begin by giving a brief overview of Mexican Formula Pictures. First, I point to common characteristics, before discerning topics treated in these films, the characters, and stars starring in them. I will also briefly point to some films, which have become subjects of previous research. After this rather generic introduction, I position Mexican Formula Pictures within their historical context, before analyzing their production and distribution practices. Accordingly, I will then introduce and position *La India María's* work within its historic context and take a look at production and distribution practices.

Wrestling, Dancing, Action, and Comedy

Although Mexican Formula Pictures vary in their themes and stories, they share a set of characteristics. First of all, they were widely consumed in movie theaters, on VHS and DVD, or on television, despite the deviation from what is commonly considered to be a well-made film. Second, the films or television shows adhered to formulas, which were endlessly recycled. Once a film was proven to be a hit, films similar in theme, with the same characters, impersonated by the same actors, and sometimes even identical stories were produced in subsequent years. Yet another form of recycling was to shoot sequels or adapt successful stories to fit the television screen or vice-versa. Often, stories or characters were first popular with the television audience and only subsequently were the series and sketches developed into feature films. Also, remakes of former box office hits were common across the spectrum of themes.

Third, most of the works center on certain character types[7] such as dancers, wrestlers or drug dealers, which are commonly impersonated by the same actor or actress in several

[7] In contrast to complex filmic characters with multilayered personalities and individual development, character types are schematically reduced. When referring to characters of Mexican Formula Pictures, I always employ the term 'type', which I derive from the theorists Umberto Eco. At one end of the spectrum Eco identifies individual characters that address the spectator as the plot unfolds, gradually becoming perceptible. At the other end of the spectrum, Eco identifies schematically reduced characters, so-called types, who are immediately recognizable on account of a few distinctive traits and schemata (Eco 1986: 169).

films. Many of these type performers reached star status. Besides guaranteeing commercial success, they also seem to have favored audience identification. In general it can be noted that most of the cultural products that make up the corpus of this study are closely aligned with certain star actors and actresses.

Ill. 2 and Ill. 3: PULQUERÍA / THE PULQUE SHOP (Víctor Manuel Castro, MX, 1980–1992) and PICARDÍA MEXICANA / SPICY MEXICAN SAYINGS (Abel Salazar, MX, 1977–1997) are both known examples of Mexican Formula Pictures with numerous sequels, a television series and many imitations.

When taking a look at the films themselves the following generalizing observations can be made: Instead of being neatly crafted, they are marked by countless flaws. These range across all categories of film analysis. The stories are generally simple and straightforward. Mostly, plots are linear, however narrative flows are frequently interrupted by dance, comical or other routines. Characters are usually shallow, lacking any psychological motivation, and the acting often comes across as wooden. Also, the cinematography focuses on the basics: camera movements are kept to a minimum with the main goal of following and framing characters. Often, the lighting is awkward. It is either too bright or too evenly lit and missing a continuous tonality. Special effects are mostly inexistent or strikingly bad, and technical gaffs are common. Furthermore, soundtracks are permeated with echoes and other disruptive noises, which makes dialogs hard to understand. In the same line, musical scores and recordings often sound hollow.

Apart from the outlined similarities, the films, television shows and straight-to-video productions discussed in this dissertation vary considerably. After watching a large

number of Mexican films marked by the above outlined aesthetics and popular success, I grouped them by theme and character types. I have created four thematic categories to structure the material in a descriptive manner. I refrain from speaking about genres, because often the films could most accurately be labeled as genres mixes, incorporating various aspects.

First of all, wrestling films starring famous *luchadores* (wrestlers) conquered the hearts of Mexican audiences. Second, lightly dressed or naked women became the main protagonists of a myriad of sexy films. Third and most popular in the 1980s were films on border issues telling stories of migrants crossing to the United States, drug trafficking, and other adventures in the 'dangerous' border zone. Finally, producers endlessly recycled comedies with antiheroes from the lower classes.

However, in Mexican Formula Pictures, themes often overlap and sometimes it is quite difficult to clearly situate a film within only one category. It is widely known that categorizing bears certain dangers, one of which would be to think of categories as being clear-cut. This assumption would be particularly misleading for the films discussed in this dissertation. Often, the most successful elements of each category such as nudity, dance routines, antihero characters were combined. The results were for example comedies spiced up with nudity, taking place in border locales, to which a fighting scene was added in the final showdown.

Last but not least, throughout this chapter, I touch on a variety of subjects that call for an in-depth analysis and raise a series of questions of theoretical, historical, and aesthetic nature. However, I wish to postpone an in-depth discussion to forthcoming chapters, for this chapter aspires to present a general introduction of a widely unknown corpus of films, television series and straight-to-video productions.

Wrestling Films

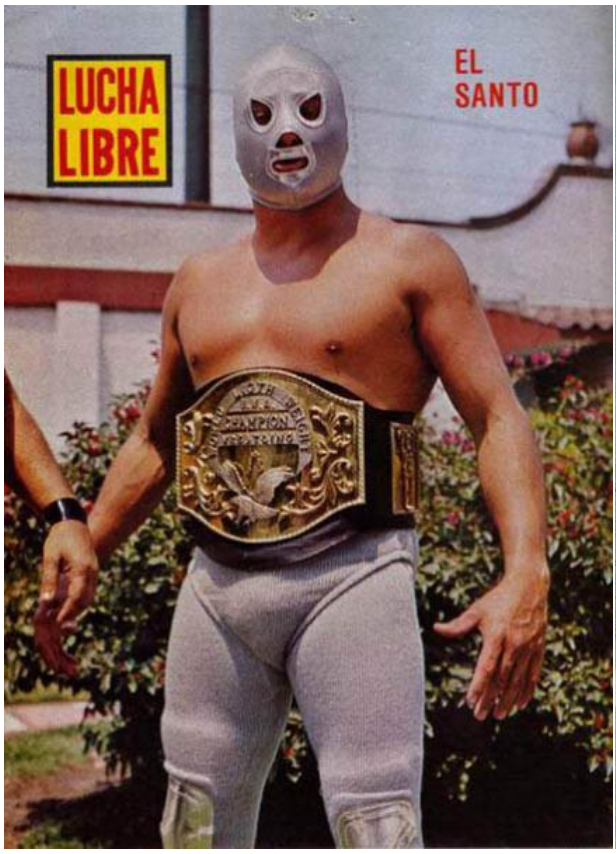
Since the late 1950s, countless films were set in the world of wrestling and starred famous fighters (in Spanish: *luchadores*) developing successful franchises based on real wrestlers such as *Blue Demon, Mil Máscaras,* and *El Santo* (Levi 2001: 337; Syder and Tierney 2005: 40). Typically, these wrestlers appeared in different media (television, comics, cinema) over a long period of time. Like franchises such as *Batman* or *James Bond*, they were the main element in the marketing strategy (Peralta 1999: 35). The wrestling films have previously been described by scholars and critics as a mix of genres — ranging from melodrama to comedy, science fiction, or horror (Levi 2001: 337). Heather Levi points out what moviegoers could expect:

> What distinguished the wrestling films from other movies was the insertion of one or more scenes of lucha libre into the narrative. The wrestlers would spend most of the screen time battling evil, solving mysteries, or untangling domestic complications, the plot interrupted by gratuitous lucha libre matches tucked into the narrative like awkward dance numbers (Levi 2001: 337).

Most wrestling films do not seamlessly integrate the in-the-ring fights into the ongoing narrative, but wrestling heroes (also called *lucha libre* heroes) begin by fighting monsters or other opponents outside the ring — this is considered the main story —, then all of a sudden they go back to their day job, which consists of wrestling in the ring. Frequently, the footage of the wrestling matches is taken from actual fights and the integration into the narrative acts as padding, which Eric Schaefer has described as a common practice of exploitation production — a cheap way of filling running time (Schaefer 1999: 68). These wrestling scenes, often lasting over five minutes, sometimes even ten, contain no or very little plot development and solely focus on the physical spectacle (Syder and Tierney 2005: 40).

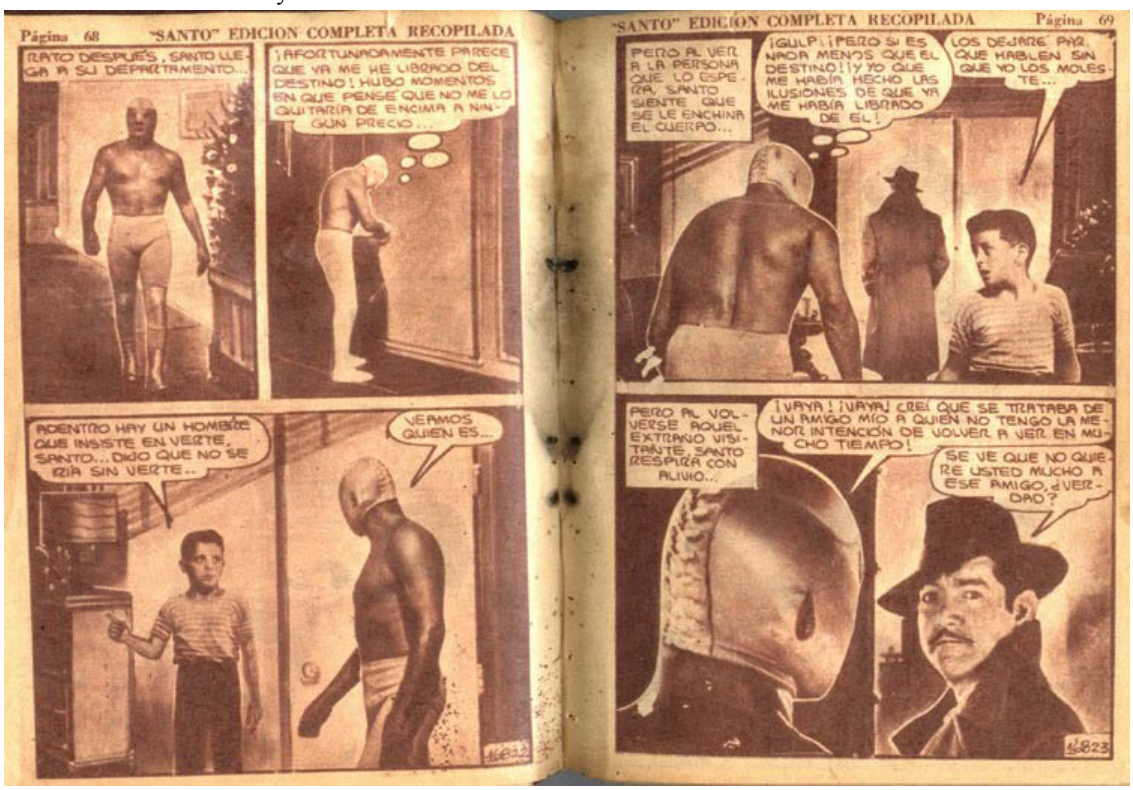
What is striking and widely noted about *lucha libre* movies is the extent to which they utilize conventions and the iconography of horror movies, science fiction films, and Westerns made in Hollywood. Not only do they include similar characters such as the mad scientist, vampires, etc., but some explicitly refer to whole scenes or scenarios form established classics (Syder and Tierney 2005: 38). Wrestling films not only freely borrow from other films, but one could be speaking of a "recycling culture" (Greene 2005: 16). Alongside Hollywood as a frame of reference, many of the films incorporate indigenous themes, characters, or settings. Homegrown monsters such as the Aztec Mummy or the *Llorona* (the crying woman) frequently embody a particular cultural thread very specific to the Mexican context (Syder and Tierney 2005: 39).

The success of the wrestlers dates back to before their presence on the big screen. Initially, these professional fighters became famous in the ring as either fair (*técnico*) or ruthless (*rudo*), representing either good or bad (hero/antagonist). Often they changed their moral stance over the course of their career — sometimes even during the course of a fight. Attending *lucha libre* matches counted among the favorite spare time activities of the urban lower classes before the series and films were produced and became widely popular (Bertaccini 2001: 79; Levi 1999: 180). With the introduction of television, the wrestling matches and fictional *lucha libre* serials were aired on the then new medium, opening additional spaces and practices for the reception of *lucha libre* — notably, middle and upper class audiences (Levi 2001: 337). Despite this success, in 1954 the wrestling shows were banned from television for being too violent, particularly for young viewers. From that point on, whoever wanted to watch the fictional wrestling stories onscreen had to go to the movie theater.



Ill. 4: *El Santo, el enmascador de plata* (Santo, the wrestler with the silver mask) is Mexico's most famous wrestler. He always wears his silver mask.

Ill. 5: Postcards of stars, here Isela Vega, were given out by distributors to foster a fan culture.



Ill. 6: The wrestler *El Santo* became famous in the ring and through a comic strip published regularly in various Mexican newspapers, before staring in a myriad of films.

When Mexican wrestling films are brought up, it cannot be done without mentioning *El Santo*, *el enmascarado de plata* (The saint with the silver mask) — Mexico's most famous wrestler of all times. For almost three decades he was omnipresent in films, the arena, comic strips, radio and television, as well as in the print press. Film historian Mora describes him and his media products as a never-ending series (2005: 106). He acted in over 50 wrestling films and has become a legend in Mexican culture (Fernández Reyes 2004). In the 1960s, he starred in at least one film per year, constantly fighting the evil of the world and threats from outer space. *El Santo* debuted in the ring, subsequently a comic strip was dedicated to him and regularly published in the press, before he finally started to appear on screen (Bertaccini 2001: 95).

Just as in the comic strips, in his films he defeats monsters, vampires, or other evil creatures. In SANTO EN LA FRONTERA DEL TERROR / SANTO ON THE TERROR BORDER (Rafael Pérez Grovas, MX, 1969) for example, he undertakes a dangerous journey to the border where he fights against a mad scientist exploiting undocumented Mexican workers. SANTO CONTRA LAS MUJERES VAMPIRO / SANTO AGAINST THE VAMPIRE WOMEN (Alfonso Corona Blake, MX, 1962) is one of his most successful films (Bertaccini 2001: 103; Wilt 1998: 139). Here *El Santo* fights against vicious women who try to seduce him with their supernatural sexual powers. Over time, modernization left its mark on the character, and toward the end of his onscreen career *El Santo* faced new enemies. In SANTO CONTRA EL ASESINO DE TELEVISIÓN / SANTO AGAINST THE TV MURDERER (Rafael Pérez Grovas, MX, 1981) he is equipped with the newest technologies to fight his enemy who is no longer an attractive woman, a mad scientist or some wild beast, but a miscreant trying to destroy the accomplishments of modern society.

The wrestler *El Santo* remained a mystery to his fans, for he refused to reveal his true identity and always wore the silver mask, even when speaking to the press about catholic faith, the importance of fidelity, and family values (Bertaccini 2001: 105). Only once, shortly before his death did he reveal his face on television. He was however buried in his wrestling suit and with his mask (Levi 1999: 182). In short, *El Santo* was a hero on and off screen. His consistency made him a good companion to his audience and their every day habits of media consumption (Bertaccini 2001: 104; Fernández Reyes 2004: 17f.).

My previous remarks might have led to the assumption that the hero of wrestling films had to be male. However, this is not the case: particularly in the 1960s, female wrestlers (on and off screen) became increasingly popular (Wilt 1998: 140). Films such as LAS LUCHADORAS VS. EL MEDICO ASESINO / THE WRESTLING WOMEN AGAINST THE MURDER DOCTOR (René Cardona, MX, 1962) or LAS LUCHADORAS CONTRA LA MOMIA / THE WRESTLING WOMEN AGAINST THE MUMMY (René Cardona, MX, 1964), all staring Lorena Velázquez, depict female wrestlers fighting the evils of the world. Just as their

male counterparts, the heroines expose their body, which stresses their performance and creates part of the visual pleasure.

Sexy Movies

Erotic allusions, naked skin, and prostitution are the main characteristics of the lucrative Mexican 'sexy movies', a series of films that mostly use the dance club or brothel as the main setting to develop stories centering on female dancers. *Cabaretera* (cabaret) and *fichera* (token) dancers have played the leading role in numerous films, which ultimately led to two discernable film categories. The terms *cabaretera* and *fichera* were used by Mexican critics, industry professionals, as well as film scholars to describe movies with the aforementioned dancers in leading roles. Over time, many of these films simply featured excessive nudity. Hence, it makes sense to combine the two. Sexy movies play a pivotal role in my research, because they proliferated widely during the same period in which the films of *La India María* were first released in theaters (early 1970s to late 1980s). The *fichera* films are commonly perceived to be derivations of the *cabaretera* films (produced before the 1960s) (De la Mora 2006: 109). Due to the many similarities, I wish to briefly point to what I consider important aspects of the *cabaretera* film, the predecessor of the *fichera* film or more generally Mexican sexy movies.

The *cabaretera* films up the 1960s, commonly combine a series of dance routines with a simple story: a young innocent girl from the countryside comes to the city and gets into trouble. Due to unfortunate circumstances, she is forced to work at a cabaret as a dancer. Often she ends up as a prostitute or she becomes a famous dancer, or both (García Riera 1998: 154). Just as in the wrestling films, the main attraction of these films is the body spectacle. The dance numbers are performed in their full length, continually slowing down the narrative to focus entirely on the performance. The actresses performing the leading part were commonly 'exotic' dancers, who previously worked in the theater.[8] Also, Cuban stars invaded the screen to perform Afro-Caribbean/Cuban dances in elaborate musical numbers. The *cabaretera* films gradually popularized the character type of the seductive woman who enticed her audience with provocative body movements (Blanco Borelli 2008: 215).[9]

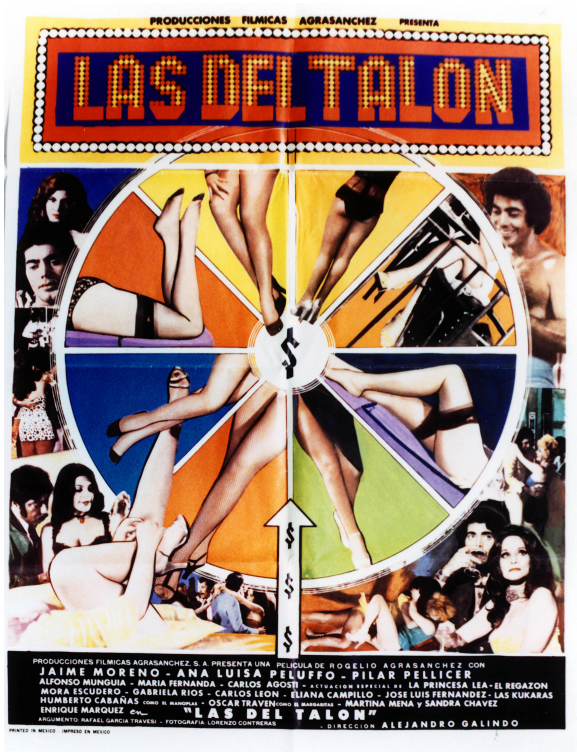
[8] One of the performers was Yolanda Montes. She appeared as the character Tongolele in a large number of films in which she ecstatically shook her hips and other body parts (Stevenson 2001). The titles of the films she performs in often reveal their entire plot. In LAS FABULOSAS DEL REVENTÓN II / THE FABULOUS WOMEN OF THE WILD PARTY II (Fernando Durán Rojas, MX, 1982) Tongolele performs a series of dance numbers, while trying to open a dance club in Acapulco.

[9] However simplistic or sometimes contradictory these films might have been, they have received a considerable amount of scholarly attention. In particular their social function has been debated. Film scholar Sergio De la Mora argues that they raised questions of available gender roles after World War II. By the mid 1950s women had obtained the right to vote and in the course of industrialization began to enter the labor market (De la Mora 2006: 51). Joanne Hershfield and Dolores Tierney suggest that the *cabaretera* films echoed the social conflict of new roles available for women (Hershfield 1996: 77;

In the 1960s and 1970s, *fichera* films combined explicit nudity and soft-core sex with any imaginable topic. The stories are often based on female dancers from whom male customers buy dances with tokens (*fichas*), frequently the prelude to a sexual encounter. In these films the focus clearly shifted from the earlier *cabareteras*: naked female bodies are shown in long takes, mostly in tight framing. Not only was the sexual content heightened, but also the male protagonists of such films allowed the viewer to vicariously experience a male heterosexual adventure. Commonly, a typical Mexican playboy gets into a series of situations in which he has to seduce a number of beautiful women. Films such as BELLAS DE NOCHES / BEAUTIES OF THE NIGHT (MX, 1974) and its sequel LAS FICHERAS: BELLAS DE NOCHE II / THE B GIRLS: BEAUTIES OF THE NIGHT II (MX, 1976), both directed by Manuel M. Delgado, present a variety of narrative lines all intersecting at the club where the *ficheras* work. A series of side comedy routines by known actors are inserted to spice up the plot (Ramírez Berg 1992: 126). Other films such as NOCHE DE CABARET / CABARET NIGHT: QUEENS OF THE DANCE FLOOR (Rafael Portillo, MX, 1977), PULQUERÍA / THE PULQUE SHOP (Víctor Manuel Castro, MX, 1980), or LA GUERRA DE LOS SEXOS / THE WAR OF THE SEXES (Raúl de Anda Jr., MX, 1978) all feature a Mexican macho who fears having lost his manhood or being homosexual. Subsequently, he uses one or more women to regain his potency.[10]

Tierney 1997). For feminist scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli, on the other hand, the performers are torn between different dominating factors such as the state or patriarchy (2008: 231). Charles Ramírez Berg notes that in some rare cases such as AVENTURERA / ADVENTURESS (Alberto Gout, MX, 1949) *cabaretera* films inquire social issues such as corruption (1992: 125).

[10] Compared to the *cabaretera* films, the *fichera* films have less frequently become the subject of research. Nevertheless, Ramírez Berg has dedicated a chapter to *fichera* films and finds a loss-of-potency/regained-potency formula repeated in endless numbers of sexy-comedies (Ramírez Berg 1992: 126). The reason for the lack might be found in the historic periods the films were produced in. The *cabaretera* films are often considered to still belong tot he Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, a period which is widely researched, whereas the *ficheras* belong to the so-called 'crisis'.



Ill. 7 amd Ill. 8: Films such as TIVOLI (Alberto Isaac, MX, 1974) or LAS DEL TALÓN / THE ONES WITH HEELS (Alejandro Galindo, MX, 1978) have sparked a new generation of sexy Mexican Formula Pictures generating lucrative revenues

Again, a small number of actresses and actors starred in numerous sexy movies. Usually, their appearance guaranteed box-office success. Most controversial was probably Sasha Montenegro, an actress of Italian decent. She started out her career in *lucha libre* films, obtaining several minor parts in movies starring *El Santo*. In the 1970s and the 1980s, she became one of the most famous *fichera* performers starring in films such as NOCHE DE CABARET or PULQUERÍA, just to name two examples. In NOCHE DE CABARET Montenegro plays a transvestite dancer who is in fact a woman. Then again, she appears as a sexy doctor in PULQUERÍA. However, the main reason Sasha Montenegro moved into the limelight was probably not her role as a *fichera*, but the fact that she carried on a relationship with the Mexican president Lopez Portillo (1976–1982), who was still married at the time.

Isela Vega was another actress who became known through her sexually explicit on-screen performances (see Ill. 5). Vega commonly personified a sexy blond woman. Contrary to Sasha Montenegro, Isela Vega was associated with a multilayered star text. Her body of work is harder to categorize for she appeared in over one hundred films ranging from soft-core *ficheras,* to television series, and independent art projects (De la Mora 2009: 245). Although Vega had two husbands, she created an image of herself that was never tied to any man. Vega also crossed national boundaries; she played in a series of Hollywood films, among them THE DEADLY TRACKERS (Barry Shear, US, 1973) based on a screenplay by Samuel Fuller. In 1983, she even wrote a script and

directed her own film LAS AMANTES DEL SEÑOR DE LA NOCHE / LOVERS OF THE LORD OF THE NIGHT.

Ill. 9: Featuring lots of naked skin assured success with a wide audience. In PULQUERÍA male fantasies are explicitly depicted.

The success of these films also relayed heavily on male star performers. For this purpose I simply wish to name one example namely Jorge Rivera. Debuting in the wrestling genre in the 1960s, he had his breakthrough as a handsome playboy with a troubled sex life in numerous *fichera* films among them the previously mentioned NOCHE DE CABARET or PULQUERÍA. His good looks and muscular upper-body did not only assure revenues, but might also have led to his appearances in several Hollywood films and *telenovelas*. Numerous less good-looking actors worked mostly in Mexican sexy movies. They commonly impersonate Mexican *machos* (womanizers), constantly in search of a sexual adventure. Despite their lack of sex appeal, they rarely encounter any difficulties in conquering good-looking women.

Terror and Violence on the Border

The border region between Mexico and the United States inspired many stories on migration, corruption, drug trafficking, and crimes for hundreds of Mexican Formula Pictures. Often, they depict extreme violence and stereotypical characters such as *coyotes* (people smugglers), drug dealers, poor migrants or prostitutes. Rubén Galindo

Jr., director and producer of numerous border films (*cine fronterizo*), reveals his formula:

> Primero presentas a tu personaje, después lo echas al río y empiezan los problemas, después se intensifican los problemas, y ya justo cuando se va a caer en la cascada, lo rescatas. Esa es la estructura dramática del cine mundial. Todas estas cosas las pones en situaciones de la frontera y ahí esta tu película (in Iglesias 1991: 66).
>
> First, you present your character, then you throw him into the river, and the problems start. Then you intensify them, and just before he falls down the waterfall you save him. That is the structure of World cinema. Take all these things and put them on the border, and there is your film (in Iglesias 1991: 66).

Analyzing a variety of box-office border hits — and along the lines of the wrestling and sexy movies — one could say that in addition to the above, the producer cast a border star actor for the leading role: either one of the Almada brothers or Rosa Gloria Chagoyán — the female star of the genre. Also, a band should perform a couple of *corridos* (Mexican ballads), whenever possible by *Los Tigres del Norte*. The result: a border box-office grosser generating lucrative profits.

One of the key border movies is LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO / THE RED CAR GANG (Ruben Galindo, MX, 1976). The film not only initiated the career of the Almada brothers, but also established what later became a formula: a group of Mexican migrants, all desiring to make an honest living, are willing to participate in an illegal act to reach their goal. By the time they realize what they have maneuvered themselves into, it is too late; they all die.

In LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO, as in many other border films, the narrative is repeatedly interrupted by long action scenes and a band performing several Mexican ballads, which slow down the narrative and reveal the plot. The film itself is based on a song with the same title by *Los Tigres del Norte* — the most famous *corrido* band.

Ill. 10: The film LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO (1976) is one of the most well known examples of border action films staring the Almada brothers.

Frequently, elements of border movies were combined with elements of the previously described sexy movies. MOJADO… PERO CALIENTE / WET… BUT HOT (Rafael Portillo, MX, 1989) or NOS REIMOS DE LA MIGRA / MAKING FUN OF THE BORDER PATROL (Victor Manuel Castro, MX, 1984) are just two examples. In the latter, for instance, Monica (Isela Vega), a *fichera* showgirl, is kidnapped by her uncle who heads a drug cartel in Texas. Three drunks from Mexico City sneak across the border to rescue Monica. MOJADO… PERO CALIENTE is a sort of buddy movie about the adventures of two dorky Mexican migrants. Sexy border films combine border adventures with nudity leading to a certain excess of body spectacle. Instead of just crossing the border, which is commonly depicted as being a physical struggle in itself, the characters are undressed, and cross the border hardly wearing anything.

One of the most renowned female border stars is probably Rosa Gloria Chagoyán. In the course of her career she has performed in over 50 films. She moved into the limelight in the role of a sensuous "warrior, capable of carrying the nation's burden on her shoulders" (Benamou 2009: 172). LOLA LA TRAILERA / LOLA THE TRUCK DRIVER (Raúl Fernandez, MX, 1983) — the film Chagoyán is most known for — tells the story of an innocent and attractive peasant girl (Chagoyán) who decides to take revenge for

the death of her father, who was killed for refusing to get involved with a drug trafficking mafia.

Ill. 11: In LOLA LA TRAILERA (1983) the female hero *Lola* kills her opponents, always staying truthful to her honorable principles.

The sequels LOLA LA TRAILERA 2 (1985) and LOLA LA TRAILERA 3 (1991) were equally successful. Also, a television series with the same title was produced in which *Lola* sits behind the steering wheel of a pink truck. The films and the television series follow a similar storyline: The border region becomes an unsafe place due to the evil doings of a series of miscreants. Shy at first, *Lola* learns to defeat herself against a variety of adversaries: drug dealers, brothel owners, or a blond evil woman who represent a 'white' evil opponent. In the end, she restores peace by means of her excessive body action and modern weapons. As a grand finale, she mows down her opponents with a machine gun and saves her companion's life. *The Los Angeles Times* sums up: "[The producer's] success was to strip the fiery Rosa Gloria Chagoyán down to her machine gun and a little else and to turn her loose à la Rambo against a gang of ruthless dope dealers" (Goldin and Cooper 1986: 12). To this date, Chagoyán continues to appear across different media in Mexico and the United States. In 2000, she launched a Mexican radio program *Aventuras de Lola la Trailera* (Adventures of Lola the Truck Driver), previously she hosted a folkloristic song contest or appeared at nightclubs (Benamou 2009: 177). Chagoyán's performance in numerous border films not only

brought her admirers from both sides of the border, but led to plenty of imitations, among them MUERTE EN TIJUANA / DEATH IN TIJUANA (Hernando Name, MX, 1992). Inspired by her character, truck drivers became new heroes. Spinning wheels, big steel trucks, and long roads winding through the deserted border region emerged as filmic motifs.

The two most famous male border stars are the brothers Mario and Fernando Almada. Both of them appeared in hundreds of border films often playing simple Mexicans, semi-criminals struggling to survive, or supporters of migrating Mexicans.[11]

Although critics condemn the border films for their oversimplification, the repetition of stories, and the reuse of the same actors, they also admit that these films have strongly influenced and shaped the discourse on migration (Iglesias 1991: 67).

Ill. 12: Mario and Fernando Almada appeared in a myriad of border action film impersonating stereotypical characters such as the *charro* (a singing Mexican cowboy).

Antihero Comedies

I lastly wish to introduce the fourth thematic category, which I entitle "antihero comedies". Numerous cheap-looking comedies center on what could be described as typical antiheroes from the lower strata of Mexican society who try to make a living. By the end of the films, they mostly triumph and therby turn into heroes. Their traits and strategies to reach their goals are however opposed to what is expected from a hero. The

[11] The Internet Movie Database lists over 300 titles for Mario Almada http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0021728/ (3.3.2011).

India María character and her films form part of this fourth category. Hardly ever have antihero comedies become the object of research, apart from some attempts to define different types of humor in Mexican comedies. Just as I did for the other thematic categories, I sketch out the story of a typical antihero comedy, before introducing two important character types and stars.

In an attempt to categorize and differentiate between the numerous Mexican comedies, the Mexican film scholar Tomás Pérez Turrent has described two different forms (1990: 24). He argues that Mexican comedy has its roots in either physical comedy (slapstick) or in wordplay (puns and other expressions containing multiple meanings) (1990: 24). Both forms of comedy go back to theatrical sketch performances and were strongly influenced by Spanish theater traditions (1990: 24). Turrent further distinguishes between the forms of oral pun. *Humor blanco* (white humor) is an innocent form of humor suitable for the whole family, while *albures* mainly employ double-meanings laced with sexual connotations (1990: 26).[12] Not only the jokes, but also the character types from the lower classes emerged from popular theater shows and subsequently became known through television appearances, radio shows, as well as feature films (De la Vega Alfaro 1999: 183). While some performers are identified with the innocent white humor, others are known for their *albures*. The majority commonly mixes slapstick performances with witty dialogue.

Since the Golden Age up to the 1980s, hundreds of comedies were brought to the small and big screen to entertain audiences and make them laugh. The Mexican audience enjoyed watching caricatures of ordinary Mexican men of the lower class, who repressed by the elite — constantly made fun of all authorities ranging from policemen to bureaucrats. Again, the stories and characters of antihero comedies are simple, almost overtly obvious. The narratives are mostly linear, solely interrupted by comic routines. Compared to the other categories introduced previously, this last one has a wider variety of settings that provide the backdrop for the stories. Frequently, the comedians and their character types entirely shape the films. The majority of films centering on antiheroes revolve around certain key character types that all represent a caricature of a stereotypical Mexican such as the *pelado* (an urban male character of the lower strata of society). Some of them already achieved their success during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (Pérez Turrent 1990: 25).

An important comedian and singer is Vicente Fernandez. He had his breakthrough playing a singing taco vendor (a variation of the *charro* — the character of the singing Mexican cowboy) in TACOS AL CABRÓN / GRILLED TACOS (Alejandro Galindo, MX, 1971). The story is simple and repeated in several of the films he stars in. *Champi*

[12] Mexican film scholars García Riera and Ayala Blanco label films based on *albures* as *cine lépero* (Ayala Blanco 1991: 32; García Riera 1998: 306).

(Fernandez) barely makes a living by selling tacos in the streets of Mexico City. He inherits some money and is able to open a taco restaurant. The newly acquired wealth opens new perspectives. Of particular interest to the character are the women who all of a sudden seem to be interested in him. He is flattered and starts to seduce them, but soon things get out of hand: It is uncovered that he has multiple wives and mistresses. Over the entanglements, he endangers his business and in the end, he loses his taco shop and is back on the streets.

Originally, Fernandez worked exclusively as a musician singing about the beauties and wonders of Mexico. By the time he started out his career in film, the character type of the *charro*, the singing Mexican cowboy, had already been recycled endlessly. Critics harshly condemned what they considered a bland repetition of the character type (Ayala Blanco 1991: 36ff.). Nevertheless, Fernández was loved by the audience and his live musical performances drew the crowds to the theater (Rohrer 2010a).

Yet another comedian who has to be included in this study for his exemplary status as a typical antihero is Roberto Gómez Bolaños, aka *Chespirito* (Little Shakespeare). He has predominantly worked in television creating and impersonating various comical characters. Two of them were among the most popular characters across Latin America and among Latinos in the United States: *El Chavo del Ocho* (the boy from the eighth), an orphan who lived in a poor neighborhood in Mexico City; and *El Chapulín Colorado* (the colored grasshopper), a clumsy super-hero. These two characters have been extremely successful since the 1970s: In 2005, the publication *El Díario del Chavo del Ocho* superseded the sale of Harry Potter books in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico to become the bestseller of the year and for 2013, the release of yet a new movie, EL CHAPULIN COLORADO 3D, has been announced.

Ill. 13: The hero *El Chapulín Colorado*, unlike other superheroes, never solves any problems, here in the TV series EL CHAPULÍN COLORADO / THE COLORED GRASSHOPPER (MX, 1973).

El Chavo del Ocho is an immature boy played by an adult. He and other children, also played by adults, all live in a poor neighborhood (*vecindad*) where the stories of the television series evolve. Usually, in the TV series EL CHAVO DEL OCHO / THE BOY OF THE EIGHT (MX, 1972–1992) *El Chavo* gets into some kind of argument with *El Señor Barriga* (Mister Belly), the landlord of the *vecindad* and the only wealthy character. Whenever *El Señor Barriga* enters the set, *El Chavo* finds a way to hit him, followed by an excuse that he did not actually mean to do any harm. The episodes often end in chaos or disorder with adult characters behaving like children. Characters smear talcum or dirt over each other, or they just all beat each other up. As a sort of closure for each episode, *El Chavo* directly addresses the camera pointing out the importance of personal hygiene (Nasser 2008: 140, 41). This rather peculiar combination of slapstick comedy with a didactical goal is quite common for Mexican television comedies.

Much in the same way *Chespirtio's* other character, *El Chapulín*, represents a male hero with a deficient masculinity (2008: 147). *El Chapulín* is short in height, lacks a muscular upper body, and is dressed in a red suit with a yellow patch on the chest. Between 1972 and 1979 he appeared in around 250 half-hour long television episodes. Starting in the 1980s he was featured in his own television show lasting a full hour. *Chapulín* never gets anything right; he always messes up despite his good intentions. In every episode, he sets out to solve people's conflicts ranging from everyday problems such as the unfair eviction of tenants to the extraordinary such as the recovery of a

scientific invention (2008: 159). Armed with a plastic hammer he persecutes his enemies to rescue innocent victims who constantly insult him or whish they had called more reliable superheroes such as Superman or Batman (2008: 160, 61).

To this date, the introduced character types are widely known in Mexico. They are the examples of male antiheroes. Very few female protagonists have reached similar fame with the exception of *La India María*.

Summarizing the Mexican Formula Pictures Style

To conclude my introduction to Mexican Formula Pictures, I briefly summarize the most important visible characteristics of these films, television series and straight-to-video productions.

Most of the films or television series of the four categories (wrestling, sexy movies, border action films, and antihero comedies) are based on story formulas which are repeated or recycled in endless films. The stories based on various settings are usually simple. Narratives are mostly linear, only interrupted by the display of body spectacles, which I discern as a key element of all the categories. In the wrestling films, long sequences of unmotivated wrestling fights interrupt the main story. Similarly, in the sexy movies female bodies are staged as the main attraction, scenes often consist entirely of erotic dances or women rubbing their body when taking a shower. In the border films, the body becomes the main spectacle when used to cross the border. People are raped, killed, treated like merchandise, or used to smuggle drugs. In the comedies, excessive slapstick performance accounts for humorous moments. Across the four categories, characters might spontaneously break out into dance routines or passionately sing a song, just like in musicals.

This leads me to the next common feature: the importance of music. In most of the films introduced here, music is a key element. Border films are centered on certain *corridos*, in the *fichera* movies dances are performed in full length to well known songs. Even the antihero comedies and wrestling films are often enriched with musical numbers. “People invariably reacted to musical themes in vogue, and movie producers knew from experience that attractive tunes meant more to the crowds than the specifics of a film’s story” (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 162).

As outlined, most of the films center on popular Mexican characters types such as the wrestler, the seductive dancer, the *mariachi* singer, the mean *coyote*, etc. Often these character types are cemented over time and certain actors and actresses have gradually come to impersonate a single type during their career. The characters develop over the span of their media presence. In contrast to other character types such as *James Bond*, the Mexican characters have not exclusively appeared in one genre. Rather, they exploit

a variety of narratives. Commonly genres are slightly adjusted or combined to fit the need of the lead actor or actress.

Most character types and respective actors or actresses were present across different media and cultural forms. The wrestler *El Santo* for example fought in the ring, he was present in a comic strip, on television, and on the big screen. The dancers often performed on theater stages and in films, and Vicente Fernandez starred in films and also performed his music in live concerts through his career. Last but not least, all four categories guaranteed to draw people to the theater with their star performers (Iglesias 1991: 117). All these elements (story formula, body, music, character type and star) are typical of the Mexican Formula Pictures.

Contexualisation: Interrelations between the Mexican State and the Film Industry

Private companies, which primarily aimed at making profits, produced most Mexican Formula Pictures. They evolved under very specific political circumstances. However, they did not emerge overnight at a precise historic turning point. Instead, political and industrial circumstances gradually led to a new discernable category, with a majority of them made roughly between the mid 1960s and the late 1980s. The main goal of the following chapter is to map out the political context in which the Formula Pictures were produced. Particular attention will be paid to the interrelation between the Mexican state and the film industry. I argue that certain policies and regulations (established prior to the 1960s) favored the production and distribution of Mexican Formula Pictures. This chapter is structured chronologically focusing on different presidential terms, because each president had the power to change existing regulations. Although I center on Formula Pictures and highlight the factors, which contributed to their emergence, I also provide some benchmark data for the Mexican film industry in general. This is of interest, because these movies were not marginal, but rather they made up the majority of films produced in Mexico during that period. My remarks on governmental policies should ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the ambivalent stance of these commercial products within the industry, sometimes supported by the regime in charge, at other times, actively hindered by it.

Emergence of Mexican Formula Pictures

From the late 1930s to the late 1940s, the Mexican film industry flourished because the country successfully established a mode of film production and distribution with its own studio and star system. Filmmaking in this era became one of the country's largest industries — after the lamination, steel, auto, beer, and cotton wool industries (García Riera 1998: 123). People of all social levels eagerly attended the theaters to see the internationally applauded and often romanticized filmic representations of Mexico (Noble 2005: 91; Paranaguá 1998: 33). When MARÍA CANDELARIA (XOCHIMILCO) by Emilio Fernández won the Grand Prize and the prize for cinematography (Gabriel Figueroa) at the Cannes Film Festival in 1946, Mexican cinema had reached its peak of international fame. Mexico was referred to as a great cinema nation, its industry no longer hiding in the shadows of its neighboring country the United States. However, by the following year, when MARÍA CANDELARIA (XOCHIMILCO) won yet another prize at the International Film Festival in Locarno, Switzerland, Mexico's film industry was already undergoing several changes.

Most evidently, the relation to the United States was being redefined. During World War II, the Mexican film industry enjoyed a favorable position; it received technical and financial support from its northern neighbor, which led to substantial growth and resulted in Mexico becoming the leading cinema nation within Latin America.

Argentina — the most productive film nation before World War II — was in disfavor due to its feared axes' sympathies and sanctions such as the limitation of film stock were imposed by the United States. Consequently, Argentina's production dropped drastically, and Mexico took over the position as the leading exporter of Spanish-language films (Ramírez Berg 1992: 38). World War II was not only a slack period for Argentina, but as well for Hollywood. Significantly fewer films were produced and exported during this period. Shortly after the war, the U.S. industry redefined its strategy and set among its primary goals the recovery of the Latin American market. As a result, the financial and technological support to Mexico (mainly consisting of raw film stock) was withdrawn (De la Vega Alfaro 1999: 165). The development was a harsh knockback for Mexico's industry. Temporarily, the volume of Mexican film production dropped from 71 feature films in 1946 to 57 in 1947 (De la Vega Alfaro 1999: 165). Although the number of films produced increased again and even surpassed the output of previous years, the Mexican industry lacked innovation. It had experienced a boom and knew what films worked with audiences. Instead of trying to find new stories or support technological inventions, producers relied on proven box-office hits. They gradually invested less per film produced, which resulted in a large number of films with low production values and repetitive stories previously brought to the screen (De la Vega Alfaro 1999: 165). By the mid 1950s the majority of commercial producers recycled stories and made films with extremely low budgets. This lowbudget production mode prevailed until the late 1980s.[13] Initially most common were wrestling films, antihero comedies as well as *cabaretera* films. The former two remained popular until the end of the period, in the late 1980s. *Cabaretera* films on the other hand were gradually replaced by *ficheras* or more generally sexy movies. Finally, border films were produced in abundance from the late 1970s onward.

While Mexico's lower classes ensured the ongoing success of Mexican Formula Pictures, middle and upper classes turned away from all Mexican productions. Eduardo De la Vega Alfaro suggests that the middle class clearly favored Hollywood imports over the cheaply made Mexican films (1999: 167). Additionally, the middle class began to acquire television sets which also led to a decrease in movie theater attendance. The television equipment was however too expensive for families of lower incomes at that time (De la Vega Alfaro 1985: 177). The above mentioned division led to a categorization of audiences into two groups: the popular versus the elite (including a relatively small middle class). All theses factors favored the emergence of numerous Formula Pictures.

[13] The low-budget mode of production originated during a time of economic growth, also referred to by historians as *El Milagro Mexicano* (The Mexican Miracle, 1930–1970). Inflation rates were relatively stable until 1976, when the country experienced a massive devaluation of the peso. The subsequent economic crisis culminated in the 1980s. Despite the economic crises, the Mexican Formula Pictures flourished during a time span of roughly thirty years (mid 1950s to late 1980s) with highs and lows in terms of production output.

Film Policies and Regulations

The Mexican film industry has always been inextricably linked and dependent on state policies and regulations. Hence, some preliminary remarks seem necessary to outline the particular relationship between the Mexican film industry and national politics. Typically, the political regime in charge decided on film policies and everyday practices of the industry. Due to the limitation of six years for a presidential term, business practices changed regularly, turning the industry upside down (Maciel 1999: 197). Although laws existed, they were often ignored or bypassed. Mexican film scholar Victor Manuel Ugalde expresses the uncertainty prevalent within the industry at the end of each six-year presidential term:

> …Preocupación que vino a sumarse, entre otras muchas, a las expectativas que siempre surgen en el último año del mandato presidencial. Sobre quienes serán los nuevos hombres que dirigirán los destinos del cine nacional, y por ello, que nuevos criterios normarán la práctica cinematográfica? (Ugalde 1983: 3).
>
> …Another concern adds itself to the expectations that always come up in the last year of a presidential term. The question is: who will be the new men in charge, who will decide about the national cinema, and introduce new criteria that will regulate cinematic practices? (Ugalde 1983: 3).

The above quote calls for an analysis of laws and policies of Mexico's media history along with the study of the prevailing business practices for each presidential term.

Three factors namely, distribution policy, financing, and censorship, have significantly contributed to the rise and wide proliferation of Mexican Formula Pictures. The first influential distribution policy was established during the presidential terms of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940 — 1946) in the era of Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema. The regulations introduced were aimed at maintaining and strengthening the industry's newly gained position as one of Mexico's strongest industries (García Riera 1998: 123). Most importantly, Mexican exhibitors were obliged by law to screen all Mexican films. Producers of any kind of film, including cheap fare, were thereby guaranteed that their products were to be distributed and exhibited.

The second major development leading to an increase in Formula Pictures can be found in film funding. In 1942, a bank exclusively providing credits for the national film industry was founded. The *Banco Cinematográfico* remained unique to the Mexican context. To my knowledge, no other national film industry had its own financial credit institution. Due to the bank's interest in high profits, financing was initially granted to lucrative films. It provided credits for a majority of commercial productions, among them Formula Pictures. By the 1960s the *Banco Cinematográfico* was fully nationalized and generated financing for the majority of feature films (García Riera 1998: 123). However, during Luís Echeverría's presidential term (1970–1976) credits to private producers aiming at profits were systematically denied and the bank was finally dismantled under José López Portillo (1976–1982) (Mora 2005: 140). Although the

bank funded fewer Formula Pictures after Echeverría came into office, it still played a pivotal role. Most likely, credits granted by the bank in the early years gave an initial boost to Mexican Formula Pictures.

Finally, under the film law, censorship regulations were officially established in 1949 and had an impact on production processes. Representatives of the censorship board were entitled to 'supervise' all cinematic production, which meant they had the right to review the scripts, visit the sets, and preview the final films before their release (D. Maciel 1999: 198). The state also had a say in which cinemas a film would be screened at; the censorship board could force producers to premiere in run-down cinemas or outside of the capital (D. Maciel 1999: 198). Contrary to the U.S.'s Production Code Administration (1934 1968), which clearly defined what could be shown in Hollywood mainstream cinema, Mexican censorship rules were more freely interpreted. Nevertheless, three particular issues were not tolerated. First, religious symbols, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, were not to be depicted negatively. Second, the censors consistently prohibited films about the military's dark past. Third, critical statements in films about high-level political officials of the regime in charge were intolerable (D. Maciel 1999: 203). As a result, the film industry exercised deliberate self-censorship out of fear the films would not pass the censor board; producers became reluctant to take up any social or political controversy, and critique of the State was precluded (Greene 2005: 6f.). In general, films on the border region, wrestling, sexy dance movies, or antihero comedies rarely faced problems with the censorship board, for they were considered lacking any social or political commentary. It has also been argued that the reason for authorizing films with promiscuous content might be found in the fact that the State gained revenues from the distribution and exhibition (D. Maciel 1999: 211).

The *grupo nuevo cine* and Echeverría — Enemies of Commerical Films, Lovers of Auteur Cinema

Private companies produced an increasing amount of Formula Pictures after the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. However, concurrently a partnership between the state and a group of filmmakers began to unravel in the late 1960s. A generation of young filmmakers, typically trained in Europe, aimed at bringing Mexico's realities and social conflicts to the screen. They clearly distanced themselves from the producers who solely aimed at profits (Ramírez Berg 1992: 6). Also in the 1960s, the first film school was founded at the University of Mexico (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) along with a National Film archive (*Cineteca*) (Mora 2005: 117). The rise of a new auteur cinema, along with a desire to preserve film and to educate a new generation of filmmakers, was closely related to *el grupo nuevo cine,* a group of left leaning intellectuals. Among them were film scholars Emilio García Riera, Carlos Monsiváis, Tomás Pérez Turrent, and Jorge Ayala Blanco.[14] They published a magazine *Nuevo*

[14] All of them have published numerous articles and books on Mexican cinema that have become key references for Mexican film history. For my research, I widely draw from their scholarship. However, I

Cine, launched discussions on film and politics, and called for a more innovative Mexican film culture.[15]

While new auteur films flourished in the early 1970s and particularly under the presidency of Echeverría, commercial production was actively hindered by Echeverría's regime. Echeverría took up many of the ideas and claims of the *grupo nuevo cine*. After naming his brother, a former actor, as the head of the *Banco Cinematografico* (the national film bank), he began to remodel the industry. He saw the cinema as a means for promoting Mexico in the world, and he sought to reclaim Mexico's former reputation as a cinema nation (Ramírez Berg 1992: 29). By the end of his presidential term, the state either controlled, owned or was involved in all spheres of cinematic production (D. Maciel 1999: 199).

Unlike some of his predecessors and successors, Echeverría encouraged a socially engaged and aesthetically innovative cinema (Berg 2009: 29). He personally declared private producers as the main enemies of innovation. In a speech in 1975, he chastised them and criticized the lack of ideological content in their Formula Pictures: "They seem to me to have intervened in the film industry as in a factory of some product or in banking, without any feeling for general cultural interest" (Pérez Turrent and Turner 1982: 207–09). He bluntly discouraged any private-enterprise productions and made it understood that cinema — under his presidency — was in the hands of the state (F. Sánchez 1989a: 99–101). By systematically refusing credit requests from private producers, he eventually tried to make it impossible for them to produce films (Ramírez Berg 1992: 44). As a result, some private producers withdrew from the industry, while others migrated to countries in Central or South America. Yet others established themselves in the border region between the United States and Mexico (De la Vega Alfaro 1985: 25). During Echeverría's presidency, the production of feature length films dropped drastically (Mora 2005: 139). By 1974, private participation was almost nonexistent (Ramírez Berg 1992: 45). In 1976, the number of films released fell to 61, of which only 20 were privately produced (García Riera 1998: 279). The few private producers who remained in Mexico went to *Estudios Américas*, "finding a small haven

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am fully aware of their political and ideological standpoint as well as their particular interest in auteur cinema.

[15] Simultaneously, filmmakers and intellectuals across Latin America decided to unite themselves and use film as a mean to express their political opinions. In Argentina, filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino wrote a manifesto entitled *Tercer Cine* (Third Cinema) (1976). In Brazil, filmmaker Glauber Rocha published several pamphlets on the *Cinema Novo* (New Cinema). In Cuba, Julio García Espinosa speaks of *Cine Imperfecto* (Imperfect Cinema) (Espinosa 2000 [1983]). All these movements (Mexican, Argentineans, Brazilians and filmmakers from other Latin American nations) tried to set themselves apart from Hollywood (i.e. 1st cinema) to find their own cinematic language. Many also drew on non-professional actors and they were often overtly political. However, the different movements varied considerably.

where they could continue to make the same low-cost, low-quality films as before" (Pérez Turrent and Turner 1982: 207).[16]

Portillo — Lover of a Fichera and Advocate of Mexican Formula Pictures

The consecutive administrations headed by José López Portillo (1976–1982) — lover of the famous *fichera* star performer Sasha Montenegro — literally reversed the cinematic policies and practices of his predecessor (Mora 2005: 139). The only similarity they shared was to assign family members to key positions in cinema. Portillo formed a new 'mass media' department combining radio, television, and cinema, and appointed his sister Margarita López Portillo as the director. What followed was a handful of drastic revisions. The new regime actively encouraged private enterprise productions and withdrew its involvement in the industry. Several former executives of the state-run production and distribution institutions were arrested for fraud and corruption. Margarita López Portillo repeatedly spoke out against films that reflected political or social issues. She encouraged family oriented films and international co-productions. Ironically, the majority of features being produced were border action films, antihero comedies, and sexy movies (D. Maciel 1999: 210).

Nevertheless, in 1980 Margarita López Portillo claimed to have successfully saved the Mexican film industry. The numbers seemed to be on her side. A total of 107 Mexican films were produced; 88 from the private sector and most of them with low production values. The volume of state produced films shrank to a minimum and became almost nonexistent (García Riera 1998: 304). Additionally, around 10 films by private producers were shot abroad (Romero 1981: 13). The volume of films produced in the following years confirmed the trend of numerous Formula Pictures being brought to various screens, some at theaters, others going straight-to-video[17], and others still produced for television.[18]

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[16] To this date, it remains unclear how the company managed to thrive during these years.

[17] David Wilt has generously provided me a list of Mexican straight-to-video productions with hundreds of titles. Although the list according to Wilt is not complete, it gives an idea of the extensive volume of straight-to-video productions.

[18] The volume of Mexican Formula Pictures produced in the 1980s and early 1990s are extremely difficult to calculate. As a point of departure, I looked at statistics and lists of privately produced films, most of which can be considered Formula Pictures. However, the sources at my disposition vary considerably. García Riera, for example, counts 107 in 1980 and 63 films in 1986. Numbers provided by the industry's magazine *Camara* are significantly higher. This is mainly due to the fact that foreign productions shot in Mexico were also included in the statistics by *Camara*, so were films by Mexican directors shot abroad. In 1988, for example Riera calculates a total of 76 films (1998: 331). The magazine *Camara* on the other hand counts a total of 125 films, of which 10 percent are foreign productions shot in Mexico (Camara 1989: 23). *Camara* also declares that in 1986 alone, 8 films were produced in the United States, some of them were never released in Mexico (1987a: 16). Not included in García Riera's or *Camera's* calculations are television productions (mainly *Televicine*) and straight-to-video productions. Similarly, films produced or directed by Chicanos or Mexican immigrants are not part of the corpus. To fully understand the boom, production modes such as television, straight-to-video, co-productions, etc.

Intellectuals and defenders of what they called 'quality' cinema harshly criticized the Portillo regime and accused Margarita López Portillo of mismanagement (Mora 2005: 143). In 1982, when the *Cineteca Nacional* (National Film Archive) was destroyed in a fire, and thousands of reels, documents, and books were lost, her failure seemed complete in the eyes of her critics. On the other hand, her era was among the most prosperous for commercial producers. Audiences across national borders literally absorbed the low-budget fare and certain representatives of the Mexican industry, mostly private producers, were highly satisfied, applauding the newly regained freedom, because they could finally make profits again (Ampudia Girón 1980: 14). According to the industry publication *Camara*, over 25,000 workers were employed in the industry in 1979, which corresponded to an increase of 18 percent since 1977 (Ampudia Girón 1980: 18). The Mexican trade press journalist Gabriel Marti voices his satisfaction:

> Hasta no hace poco tiempo los trabajadores que participan en el quehacer manual, creativo e intelectual de nuestro cine, habían pasado por una época de crisis laboral principalmente debido a que las puertas de nuestro cine fueron cerradas a los productores fílmicos de la Iniciativa Privada. Sin embargo, ante el llamado cordial que hizo el actual gobierno a través de Doña Margarita López Portillo, Directora General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía (RTC), los cine productores se reincorporaron a la industria fílmica y, desde hace cuatro años a la fecha, dicha producción cinematográfica ha experimentado, para beneplácito de todos y cada uno de los integrantes de nuestro cine, por ende, los del Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STPC) y del Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC). La producción fílmica sostiene en nuestros días una constante escala ascendente (Marti 1980: 9).
>
> Until recently, technical and creative workers of our industry have gone through a crisis. This was primarily due to the fact that doors were closed for private producers. Nevertheless, under the new government, represented by Doña Margarita López Portillo, Director of the Radio, TV and Film department, new favorable policies were introduced and private producers reincorporated into the industry. For the last four years, the industry has again been able to make films, both unions equally. This brought many advantages and the industry is still continuously growing (Marti 1980: 9) (Not a literal translation)

Overall, the Portillos were the most avid supporters of private producers whose main output were Formula Pictures. Contrary to previous years, consumption was no longer limited to the theater; television and video in particular became increasingly important.

De La Madrid — Economic Crisis and Another Attempt to Foster Quality

During the presidency of Miguel De La Madrid (1982–1988), the country's economic conditions worsened drastically, and the overall numbers of film produced dropped again to an average of 71 features per year (García Riera 1998: 331). Shortly before he came into office, oil prices collapsed, leading to a downturn of the Mexican economy and resulting in inflation rates of the peso of over 100 percent compared to the dollar

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need to be considered and analyzed in detail. A limitation to either a certain form of distribution or exhibition, or the adherence to a single national industry, would fall short and draw an incomplete or even inadequate picture.

(Camara 1987b: 20). At the same time, prices for technical supplies such as cameras and film stock imported from the United States remained at a high level. Additionally, Mexican producers had to pay high taxes (25 percent) to the state (Camara 1987b: 23).[19] President De La Madrid did not actively encourage the industry to produce Formula Pictures, but neither did he regulate their production. Contrary to the former regime, De La Madrid encouraged the production of artistically ambitious films by establishing a national film institute. Shortly after he came into office, the *Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía* (IMCINE) was founded. The mission of IMCINE was to foster a national high quality cinema produced by the state. Although initially headed by the retired filmmaker Alberto Isaac, the institute did not produce many films, and its financial resources were mainly used for administrative matters. After only a year in office, Isaac resigned and was replaced by Soto Izquierdo, a functionary of the ruling party (PRI). Consequently, Izquierdo supported directors he was friends with or whose work he liked. Servando González, for example, shot an expensive train epic, EL ULTIMO TÚNEL / THE LAST TUNNEL (MX, 1986), a second part to his film EL VIENTO NEGRO / THE BLACK WIND (MX, 1965), which Izquierdo had supposedly liked. Little did Izquierdo seem to care about the film's reception, as it was a total fiasco with both the public and the critics (García Riera 1998: 331). Ultimately, he was accused of violating copyright laws by supplying original film negatives of state-produced cinema to North American Spanish-language video companies for mass distribution (D. Maciel 1999: 212). To sum up, the establishment of a national film institute didn't meet its ambitious goals, but proved to be yet another disaster for films dependent on state funding. Commercial production of Mexican Formula Pictures on the other hand stayed at the forefront of cinematic production throughout the 1980s. At the beginning of the 1990s, Mexico's economic situation worsened and the peso suffered multiple devaluations. Filmmaking became almost impossible and Mexico's film industry literally collapsed.

To conclude, the Mexican film industry depended on governmental policies and regulations. Based on the regime in charge, Formula Pictures at times encountered varying support or even hindrance. Echeverría actively shut out commercial production while Portillo encouraged it. During the presidential term of Portillo and De La Madrid, border films, sexy movies and antihero comedies boomed and made up the largest output of Mexico's film industry. Therefore the period between 1978 and 1988 can be considered as the culmination of Mexican Formula Pictures.

[19] During these difficult economic times, loans were given to the Mexican State as well as to private entrepreneurs, mainly by the United States. In the mid 1980s Mexico's foreign debts were already at around $80,000 billion (Camara 1987b: 23). To what extent the film producers profited from foreign support is however uncertain.

Production 'In the Fast Lane'

Mexican Formula Pictures are marked by flaws in the filmic text, ranging from technical gaffes to poorly crafted special effects. These manifestations are not coincidental but clearly are the result of certain production practices. In the following section, I wish to take a closer look at how and under which circumstances the Mexican Formula Pictures were made.

Generally, Mexican productions are divided into three categories: independently produced films, state-supported films, and films by private entrepreneurs. Each production category responds to diverse interests, has different themes, and aims at a specific audience (Hershfield and Maciel 1999: 194). Independent productions do not receive financial support from the state, nor do they generate large revenues. Financing usually comes from universities, private investors or co-production partners in Europe, or its makers work in commercial projects and invest their earnings in their independent films. Also, they participate in alternative distribution and exhibition practices, such as cine clubs, university groups, and trade unions, and sometimes film festivals (King 2000: 141). Independent Mexican films often challenge aesthetic traditions, experiment with them and test a variety of narrative forms.[20] Second, state-supported production companies (sometimes studios) produce 'artistically ambitious' auteur films to be exhibited in the international film festival circuit. Their aim is to market images of Mexico on different international stages. Finally, private producers make the kind of films that promise commercial success. The latter are the main producers of wrestling and border films, as well as sexy movies and antihero comedies. However, depending on the political regime in charge at the time, certain companies were either privatized (under Portillo) or nationalized (under Echeverría). Therefore the division into these three production categories is sometimes problematic because producers could be state-supported one day and privately owned the next. Also, mobility across production categories was common in the Mexican industry, a phenomenon that additionally blurred the lines between the aforementioned categories (De la Mora 2009: 247). In published works on Mexican film history, the focus often lies on the state-supported films, while independent films are occasionally considered. Private sector productions, however, have been widely overlooked or they were simply labeled as bad entertainment for "lumpen working-class audiences" (King 2000: 143). As previously mentioned, no systematic research has been conducted on Mexican Formula Pictures until now, with this study, I wish to make a first contribution. However, what I present could be considered as a first hodgepodge of information, which I hope will be completed and critically questioned by future research.

[20] During the presidential term of Luis Echeverría (1970 –1976) the *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México* (UNAM) was the sole producer of independent films. Under Lopéz Portillo (1976–1982) the independents gained strength (King 2000: 140).

To structure this jumble of information, I analyze factors such as labor force and financing. Both of these elements were used to reveal the complexity of Hollywood production by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in their book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985).[21] I begin by sketching out common business practices in the making of the Formula Pictures. Of particular interest is the collaboration between private producers and union workers. In a second step, I will take a closer look at budgets and financing by comparing costs of different production categories. Alongside, I point to the economic impact of Latinos in the United States who considerably contributed to the financing of these films. Finally, I outline three important developments in production, which led to a wide proliferation of these films. First, television began producing Formula Pictures. Second, producers moved their businesses to the United States where production costs were lower; and third, some producers began to shoot on video in order to cut costs.

Strong Families and Powerful Unions

Mexican Formula Pictures guaranteed revenues, and because they were popular with a wide audience lucrative profits could often be made. As a result, a series of producers ranging from well-established private producers (including television) to small newcomers all tried their luck. Some of them were only in business for a short period of time while others thrived, producing low-budget films for several decades. I will not list names of all producers; however, I would like to point out a couple of companies as well as production strategies which played a key role.

The businesses of the Galindo, Agrasánchez, and Calderon families were prolific producers of Formula Pictures. Both the Galindos and the Calderons worked as producers since the Golden Age. Over the years, they developed stratagems that produced box office hits within weeks. The Calderons' formula was to feature naked women in order to draw the crowds to the theater, while the Galindos added action and violence to make their films more appealing. The Agrasánchez family entered the film business in 1969, when they bought the Grovas Company. Agrasánchez' output ranged from border dramas to wrestling films. Over the years, the family founded several other companies all run by different family members. Similarly, the other family businesses established different companies. In these firms administrators, directors, actors, extras, or other crewmembers were all related. Often, one person was in charge of several tasks, ranging from directing to making coffee. Actors and directors who guaranteed profits were hired and when a successful combination was found, it was repeated for several films (Iglesias 1991: 63). Frequently, family premises were used to shoot the

[21] Nonetheless, I refrain from comparing the Mexican low-budget productions to Hollywood's classical mode of production, because even though the classical Hollywood cinema was an important frame of reference for the Mexican film industry in terms of style, comparisons between the two industries are extremely complex, for their political and economical conditions varied considerably. The same holds true for what Eric Schaefer has called U.S. "classical" exploitation films with production costs comparable to Mexican mainstream production (Schaefer 1999).

films (Iglesias 1999: 234). In general, production procedures were uncomplicated. The founder of Agrasánchez commented to the *Los Angeles Times*:

> A film is born with one of my ideas. I write an eight-page treatment, give it to one of my writers, he makes a synopsis, I rewrite it and return it to him. He writes the script. I put down the money… No coterie of production secretaries, script readers, story editors, development executives, directors of creative affairs. No writers waiting to pitch stories… This isn't Hollywood... It's much more direct and businesslike… Don't come to us complaining if the script is bad… we don't care (Goldin and Cooper 1986: 13).

Despite the seemingly easy process, producers always had to include a minimum of union workers for each production; often at least twenty union members had to be employed. Private producers disliked the imposed quotas, but they couldn't do much against it because workers unions were powerful in Mexico (Iglesias 1991: 69). If producers nonetheless decided to work without union workers, they were harshly criticized and their films were nicknamed *piratas* (pirated) (Cabildo 1976).

Some background information on the involvement of unions seems necessary to understand their position within the Mexican film industry. The main reason for their remarkable strength is rooted in the industry's boom during World War II. Since then, workers organized themselves into unions. Initially there was only one union, the *Sindicato de trabajadores de la industria cinematográfica* (STIC), which included all workers, such as technicians, writers and directors. However, actors and other representatives of creative areas were unhappy with the egalitarian treatment of all members. After a grueling and bitter internal fight, the creative elite (actors, cinematographers, and writers) finally split off and formed their own union, the *Sindicato de trabajadores de la producción cinematográfica* (STPC). Consequently, a presidential accord regulating the division of labor was released in 1945. It was beneficial for the STPC, which from then on was in charge of all feature film productions, while the STIC was relegated to less prestigious tasks such as producing, distributing, and exhibiting short films, documentaries and series (Ramírez Berg 1992: 41). After World War II, significantly fewer workers were employed. In response, the unions — hoping to secure jobs for the people already in business — no longer admitted new members. Young talents were thereby excluded from film productions because everyone working on a Mexican film set had to be a registered union member (Mora 2005: 75). At the same time, members of the workers union (STIC) who were no longer allowed to work for feature film productions systematically began to bypass the established regulations defined in the presidential accord. Producers engaged STIC union members in projects, which they labeled as serials. Later they combined them into one or more feature length films. Thereby they avoided the higher costs the creative union insisted upon. Patching up serials into feature films was officially forbidden; nevertheless, it became a common business practice.

Cheap Fare

Private producers were eager to cut costs and keep budgets low to minimize risks and maximize profits. Working with family members or with STIC union members were two means to bring down spending. Several additional measures were taken to shave costs. For example, shooting times were drastically reduced, seldom exceeding three to four weeks (S. A. Agrasánchez 1971–1984; Pérez Turrent 1995: 141). Often, several films were shot concurrently, or shootings followed each other seamlessly. This allowed producers to work with the same crew (S. A. Agrasánchez 1971–1984). Producers also looked for locations outside of Mexico where expenses were lower. In countries such as Guatemala or Costa Rica, no unions existed and labor was cheap. Producers could work around the clock without having to pay overtime (Rohrer 2010c). Additionally, they launched co-productions with Puerto Rico, Columbia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Venezuela. Often, a Latin American actor or actress was contracted with the aim of recouping the Latin American market (Mora 2005: 106f.). Producers also used previously shot material to extend films to the desired duration. To further cut costs, scripts of films that had proven to be successful at the box office were slightly adjusted and then reused. Finally, there was no time for rehearsals; and directors were forced to use the material they could get in the first take.

Ill. 14 and Ill. 15: For all Mexican Formula Pictures, production was kept simple to cut spending. Here a picture taken on the set of SUPERZAN Y EL NIÑO DEL ESPACIO / SUPERZAN AND THE BOY FROM SPACE (Rafael Lanuza, MX, 1973).

The resulting production budgets were very low. But what exactly is meant by a low budget? How did the costs compare to other production categories? To begin with, I wish to underline that most Mexican films are produced with relatively tight budgets, particularly when compared to Hollywood productions. From 1946 to 1950 the average cost for a Mexican feature dropped from $111,000 to $67,000, and in 1959 it was already as low as $53,000 per film (García Riera 1998: 151). In the following years, budgets remained at a low level, even though the actual numbers rose. In 1970, features

cost around $120,000.[22] By the late 1970s, average production costs in the private sector climbed to $190,000. At the same time, state-produced films cost approximately $90,000 more (Ampudia Girón 1980: 19).[23] Finally, throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Mexican feature films cost approximately $200,000. This was not only low compared to U.S. productions, but also in the Latin American production landscape: only Peru and Chile produced films for less money (Getino 1998: 53). Also during the 1980s, the gap of production costs between privately produced films and the state-supported ones increased. In 1987, the latter were twice as expensive as privately produced films. Additionally, the state ran an expensive administrational machinery gobbling up almost the same amount as the actual film production (A. C. Galindo 1987b: 12). Since the Formula Pictures were part of the output of the Mexican industry produced by private entrepreneurs, one might suspect that their budgets approximately correspond to the average production cost of a privately produced film. An analysis of 53 Formula Pictures by the Agrasánchez Company produced in the 1970s and 1980s results in an average cost of $80,000 — a sum clearly inferior to the average cost of a private production (around $200,000).[24] In the 1970s, budgets of the Agrasánchez Company were as low as $40,000. Agrasánchez' cheapest film was SUPERZAN Y EL NIÑO DEL ESPACIO / SUPERZAN AND THE BOY FROM SPACE (Rafael Lanuza, MX, 1973), which only cost $32,000. Spending could be kept extremely low for this production because the film was shot in Guatemala and because its main hero, the wrestler *Superzan*, was a character invented by the producer and personified by an unknown actor. By casting an unknown actor, instead of a star such as *El Santo,* the film's budget was significantly lowered. Having access to a limited set of data makes it difficult to draw conclusions. However, the numbers provide a general background to position the Formula Pictures within the context of privately produced films and the industry in general. In the subsequent analysis of the production context of the *India María* films, the numbers provide a frame of reference to compare budgets.

Privately produced films were predominantly financed through distribution guarantees given by the Mexican film bank or later directly by Mexican and U.S. distributors. The audience's familiarity with the cast and the film's themes determined the amount of the credit. Producers covered the remaining costs. In Mexico, the problem known as *enlatamiento*, the withholding of new films from circulation, complicated financing. *Enlatamiento* implied that Mexican films were not necessarily released shortly after

[22] Ramírez Berg notes that the average cost per film in the 1940s were roughly the same as in the 1970s if taking the inflation rate into account (1992: 37). In addition, salaries for motion picture workers were raised which implied that producers had to cut back in other areas or they simply made less profits.

[23] For all sources indicating costs only in Mexican pesos, I used the historic exchange rate provided by the Global Financial Data database (www.globalfinancialdata.com). The exchange rate used was a quarterly yearly average of the Mexican peso.

[24] Rogelio Agrasánchez provided me with the data of his father's company. I am in possession of the copies. The originals are in Harlingen, Texas, in his private collection (S. A. Agrasánchez 1971–1984).

their completion, but they were shown to the public when the exhibition facilities allowed it. This implied that they had to wait for a slot to open, given their lower priority compared to foreign competitors (Mora 2005: 101). The withholding from commercial release made it more difficult for producers to calculate revenues and recover investments, as it could take up to several years until a finished film was finally released.

In the 1970s, U.S. distributors started to play a crucial role in financing. Often, they guaranteed over two thirds of the budget, knowing that the films would attract a large Spanish-speaking audience in the United States (S. A. Agrasánchez 1971–1984). Latinos in the United States had gradually become the most important consumers of Mexican low budget fare, assuring between fifty and seventy percent of the Mexican industry's revenues (García Riera 1998: 305; Goldin and Cooper 1986: 11). "Hispanics in the United States are the wealthiest Hispanics in the world," one study enthused (Sinclair 1999: 95). Latinos in the United States paid high admission fees and the dollar was not subject to inflation. As a result, they became the most important consumer group and until the late 1980s constant increasing profits were made with Mexican Formula Pictures.

Benchmark data on Latinos in the United States attests the group's increasing importance. By 1982, an estimated 22 million Latinos were living in the United States, which made the country one of the most important Spanish-speaking territories (Sinclair 1999: 95). An estimated 6 to 10 million migrants were undocumented, and numbers were constantly rising. Between 1970 and 1980, even more people migrated to the United States, a majority of them Mexican (Camara 1984d: 4). They resided in four major regions: The Southwest (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, southern Colorado, and California), the Northeast (New York, New Jersey, Washington, and Philadelphia), the Midwest (Chicago), and Florida. Cubans preferred Florida, while migrants from Puerto Rico lived primarily in New York and Chicago. Mexicans have settled across the country, although the majority live in the Southwest (Valdés Bernal and Gregori Torada 1997: 14). California is the state with the highest density of Spanish-speakers (most of them Mexican), with Los Angeles being the center. In the 1980s, approximately 4 million Mexicans lived in the city — more than in most Mexican cities (Camara 1984d: 5).

Televisa Producing Formula Pictures

Besides the previously outlined particularities in production, three major developments shaped production practices. First, the television company *Televisa* began producing feature films, and among them Formula Pictures; second, Mexican producers established their businesses in the United States, where they could produce for less money; and third, some producers began shooting on video.

As the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema came to an end, the Golden Age of *Televisa* — run and owned by the Azcárrga family — began (Sinclair 1999: 32). Along with the Golden Age of Cinema's demise in the 1950s, several directors, actors, and other industry professionals migrated from cinema to television. The conglomerate *Televisa* eventually became one of the main producers of Formula Pictures. The entrance of *Televisa* in film production is without a doubt one of the most significant developments in the history of Mexican Formula Pictures. In prior years, *Televisa* had already become one of the main exporters of *telenovelas* and the step to producing feature films seemed almost like a logical consequence (Sánchez Ruiz 2000). *Televicine*, *Televisa's* production and distribution branch, expanded in the late 1970s in order to generate additional profits, particularly in the United States. Their formula was simple: entertainment at modest costs, distributed in both the domestic and the foreign markets, to the big and small screen. *Televisa's* greatest advantage was its previously established dominance on the Spanish-language market in the United States and across Latin America.[25] LA ILEGAL / THE ILLEGAL (Arturo Ripstein, MX, 1979), one of *Televicine's* early productions, made net profits of over one million dollars shortly after its release in the United States (Ramírez Berg 1992: 213). Similar success celebrated the soccer comedy EL CHANFLE (Enrique Segoviano, MX, 1979) starring Robert Gómez Bolaños a.k.a. *Chespirito* (Little Shakespeare). Both border movies and antihero comedies continued to thrive during the 1980s and assured profits for *Televicine*. In 1979, *Televicine* produced 14 films and 20 the following year (García Riera 1998: 308, 44). At the same time, the company was producing great numbers of *telenovelas* and shows that were highly demanded and exported globally (Sánchez Ruiz 1986: 42). A key factor contributing to the success of the films produced by *Televicine* was primarily a smart marketing strategy. The company hired famous television actors to appear in its films. For example, television audiences already knew *Chespirtio* for his comical sketches as *El Chavo del Ocho* and *El Chapulín Colorado*. Lucía Méndez, who played the leading role in LA ILEGAL, had previously moved into the limelight through her appearances in *telenovelas* (García Riera 1998: 308).

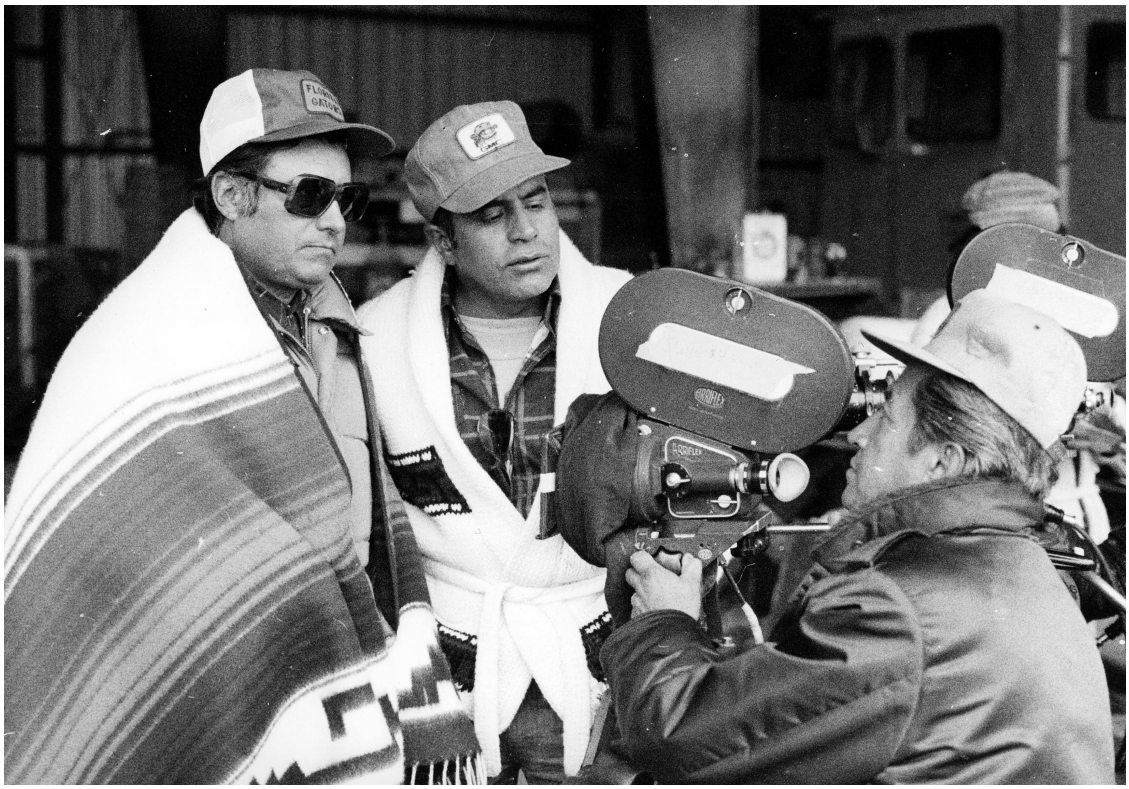
Cross-Border Productions

The second crucial contribution to the rise of low-budget films came from run-away productions. In the 1970s, President Echeverría froze credits for private producers and as a result, many of them moved away from the center of cinematic production in Mexico City. Companies such as Agrasánchez and Galindo bought properties on the U.S. side of the border and began producing in a "cross-border context", as Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson call this production mode (2008: 1). The Agrasánchez family alone produced dozens of low-budget films in the United States, with an average of one feature film every two months (Goldin and Cooper 1986: 13; Ramírez Berg 1992: 213). The new production location brought about numerous advantages.

[25] By the early 1990s, Televisa even became the main distributor for theatrical releases of Mexican films in its home market (Getino 1998: 129).

Producers paid lower taxes and union regulations did not apply or were not enforced. Thus, lower salaries could be paid; cast and crew worked overtime, and producers were able to work with smaller crews. Films were shot on the producers' properties and no sets had to be built. Additionally, crew and cast were accommodated on the family property. While salaries were paid in pesos, profits were made in the much more stable dollar. For all of the aforementioned reasons, production costs of cross-border films were considerably lower than Mexican productions. Distribution throughout the United States was assured in advance (Iglesias 1991: 62). Additionally, higher admission prizes to movie theaters in the United States guaranteed profitable revenues. By the mid 1980s, instead of paying 200 pesos (40 cents), moviegoers in the United States paid $4 for their ticket. With an estimated average budget of $60.000, these films quickly paid for their expenses, bringing in one hundred thousand dollars in as little as a month in Los Angeles alone (Goldin and Cooper 1986: 12) . Box office hits such as LOLA LA TRAILERA 2 (1985) reaped a total of $3.5 million in profits — $2.5 million alone in the United States (Goldin and Cooper 1986: 12).

Ill. 16: Many Mexican Formula Picture producers moved their businesses to the border region in the United States to bypass regulations and work with family members instead of union workers.



Ill. 17: Mexican Formula producers preferred to film with a small crew, here on the set of SOY CHICANO Y MEXICANO / I AM CHICANO AND MEXICAN (Tito, Novaro, MX, 1975), produced by the *Agrasánchez* family.

The producers discovered that the border region itself offered many dramatic stories: undocumented migrants struggling to cross the desert, drug trafficking, gangs, and other adventures appealing to the migrant community living in the United States (Iglesias 1991: 64). The cross-border producers didn't limit themselves to border films, they also made comedies, sexy movies, and wrestling films. By the mid 1980s, U.S. unions requested that American workers be employed in Mexican productions shot in the United States. Additionally, Mexican casts and crews working on U.S. territory were required to get work permits — a process which could take up to several months (Iglesias 1991: 69, 78, 83). These regulations complicated production and by the end of the 1980s, cross-border productions lost their financial appeal.

Straight-to-Video

Statistics by U.S. majors on distribution clearly show that video, from the late 1980s onward, was the distribution form constantly generating higher revenues, surpassing those of movie theaters (Getino 1998: 37). Oftentimes, a cheaply produced film recovered an important part of its investment through its video release in the United States. Due to the increasing profitability of video, some producers completely abandoned shooting on film (which was more expensive) with subsequent exhibition in theaters. Instead, they opted to produce and release films exclusively on video (García Riera 1998: 346). García Riera calculates a total of 120 straight-to-video productions between 1983 and 1988. The number clearly confirms that the business was lucrative,

and not exclusively for the U.S. majors. Some production companies even left Mexico to make straight-to-video films in Hollywood, using the sets of big budget pictures (Iglesias 1991: 78f).

The straight-to-video products mostly brought to the screen border stories and reflected ongoing political issues. David Wilt labels the politically themed videos "reality-based" exploitation. Producers commonly used scandalous hooks in the press to develop their stories. The actuality of the topic assured them of an audience and fewer or no promotional efforts had to be made (2009: 158). The comedy LA LEY SIMPSON ME VIENE WILSON / THE SIMPSON LAW MAKES ME WILSON (José Loza, MX, 1988) for example portrays four undocumented migrants of Mexican descent living in the United States — a copy of the famous character Cantinflas, a transvestite, a yard worker, and an innocent maid. The film mocks the circumstances under which undocumented immigrants had to live after the Simpson-Rodino bill was passed. The new law established in 1988 and it represented a serious effort by the U.S. government to reduce illegal immigration. Undocumented migrants who could prove continuous residence in the United States after 1982 were legalized. All others were declared illegal and were forced to leave the United States and return to Mexico. The law was passed in the midst of a severe economic crisis in Mexico and relative prosperity of the U.S. economy. Many Mexicans, even though they were not legal migrants, decided to remain in the United States to assure an income for their family. LA LEY SIMPSON ME VIENE WILSON / THE SIMPSON LAW MAKES ME WILSON is an exemplary case of reality-based straight-to-video films. With extremely low production values and worn-out stereotypes, it is another cheap derivation of previously produced films.

Summing up, I conclude that the films analyzed in this dissertation not only share common aesthetic and narrative features, but also a set of production characteristics. Formula Pictures were all produced by private entrepreneurs, often, family businesses, who used every imaginable measure to reduce costs. As a result, these films had very low budgets even in comparison to average production costs in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Due to their popularity with wide audiences, producers were able to generate enough revenues to finance their films. U.S. distributors were of particular importance to the financing of these films, as they knew from experience that Latinos living in the United States enthusiastically embraced them. Finally, the same professionals worked for the different production forms and formats. As a result, production procedures and the specificity of each medium gradually dissolved.

Circulation Across Borders

Historically, Mexican Formula Pictures have circulated across different territories and in particular across Latin America. However, the two most important markets were Mexico and the United States. In these two countries, they have had a unique impact. In Mexico, they were part of the national industry — at times even its main output — and circulated as such. In the United States on the other hand, they were aimed at Spanish-speaking migrants. Generally, Mexican Formula Pictures were watched in theaters, later on video, and on television. On the following pages, I reconstruct the particularity of each of these exhibitions forms — always differentiating between the situation in Mexico and the United States. In addition to reconstructing the exhibition forms, I take a look at how Mexican Formula Pictures were advertised.

Distribution in Mexico and the United States

Generally, distribution of the Mexican Formula Pictures did not differ from distribution of other Mexican films. In Mexico, at various historic moments a sole company distributed all national films across the entire country. In the United States, several companies competed against each other and bid on the lucrative films.

In Mexico, the Formula Pictures were initially distributed and exhibited similarly to the films of the Golden Age. The American investor William O. Jenkins, former United States vice-consul in Puebla and businessman, owned about 80 percent of the country's theaters by the early 1950s (Bertaccini 2001: 38; García Riera 1998: 151; Mora 2005: 77). His monopoly was harshly criticized. State officials and industry representatives accused him of the excessive distribution of low-quality films, and some even held him responsible for boosting their production (García Riera 1998: 152; Mora 2005: 78).[26] When the Mexican government finally bought the theaters owned by the Jenkins group in 1960, the Formula Pictures continued to dominate the screens of the country, contrary to prevailing expectations. By the 1980s, theatrical distribution of Mexican films was highly centralized with the company *Películas Nacionales* as the main distributor.

Películas Mexicanas on the other hand was in charge of negotiating all foreign territories. It distributed films across Latin America and throughout the United States, where companies such as *Clasa-Mohme* and *Azteca Films* dominated the distribution market of Spanish-language films.[27] In 1960, *Columbia Pictures* challenged their position by obtaining the rights to distribute Mexican films in the United States. The

[26] Miguel Contreras Torres uncovers Jenkins business practices in his book *El libro negro del cine mexicano* (the Black Book of Mexican Cinema) (1960) and accuses Jenkins of destroying the Mexican film industry with his monopoly.

[27] Both *Azteca Films* and *Clasa-Mohme* had close ties to the Mexican studios. In certain periods they were even state owned.

company actively acquired movies appealing to a wide audience, including the films with *Cantinflas* and some of the *India María's* films (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 43). In the 1980s, *Columbia's* Spanish-language theatrical distribution business — at the time holding about 40 percent of the Spanish-language market — was purchased by Mexican multimedia conglomerate *Televisa*, then the sole owner of broadcast TV stations and Spanish-language cable network in the United States (Beer 2001: 172; Klain 1980b: 3, 41). At the same time, the companies *American General*, *Million Dollar*, and *Protele Films Corporation* (former *Televicine*) stirred up the theatrical distribution market (Iglesias 1991: 100, 06f). Additionally, some of the exhibitors founded their own distribution companies; the Los Angeles based theater chain *Metropolitan*, for example, became one of the key players in California. Some of the films were distributed by small independent companies, which negotiated terms and conditions directly with the different theaters, often offering package deals with talents accompanying the screenings (Rohrer 2010a). More renowned distributors such as *Azteca Films* let exhibitors bid on movies. Whoever offered the largest sum picked up the premieres; the others acquired second and third runs. 30 to 40 percent of the box office income went to the distributors. Seldom did exhibitors pay a minimum fee per film, but they usually rented the films at prices based solely on attendance (Rohrer 2010a, 2010b). Contrary to the classical exploitation cinema as described by Schaefer, Mexican Formula Pictures were not distributed differently from other Mexican productions (Schaefer 1999: 96f.). Sometimes, *Azteca Films* even packaged box-officer grossers with state-produced auteur films. Particularly during the presidency of Echeverría exhibitors were forced to show the package and could not only acquire the film which guaranteed high revenues (Rohrer 2010a, 2010b).

Theater Attendance, Venues, and Differences between Urban and Rural Areas

After the Golden Age, but more intensely in the 1970s and 1980s, attendance to Mexico's movie theaters decreased due to competing exhibition forms, namely television and video — a trend previously experienced in the United States (Monaco 2001: 40f.). Theaters across Latin America lost almost 50 percent of their audience from 1982 to 1992 (Getino 1998: 27). In Mexico, numbers dropped from approximately 280 million spectators in 1983, to 230 million in 1990.[28] However, with a decrease of 20 percent, Mexico lost considerably fewer spectators than other Latin American countries (Elizondo 1991: 7) and remained among the leading nations in cinema attendance. In 1982, Mexicans between the ages of 15 and 65 visited the theater on average 7.2 times per year (in 1955 the average was at 12.44 visits). In comparison, Getino approximates that across Latin America adults attended the theater two or three times a year in 1985 (1998: 43).[29]

[28] For Mexico exact numbers are calculated for the timeframe between 1983 and 1990. In the following two years, attendance dropped additionally.

[29] In the United States, 18 percent fewer people attended the movie theaters during the same time frame (Getino 1998: 27). The difference between Latin America and the United States is eye-catching: While in

Generally, attending the theater was a cheap leisure activity affordable to people across social levels, including the ones with relatively low incomes. Going to the movies was even cheaper than attending major Mexican pastimes such as bull fights or the circus (Camara 1982: 12). Up until the early 1970s, theater admission prices were frozen and kept at a low level of a maximum of 4 pesos (30 cents) by law. Once the regulation was annulled, ticket prices constantly increased and largely depended on the facilities and comfort offered by each theater. A large gap opened between the luxurious cinemas and theaters with minimal comfort. Admission prices also varied considerably between regions. In the provinces they were significantly lower than in cities, predominantly in Mexico City where a ticket cost 18 pesos (80 cents) in 1978. In Yucatán, theater admission cost as little as 2 pesos (10 cents) (Camara 1978b: 19). In general, Formula Pictures were mainly exhibited in theaters with low admission prices.

Exhibition venues underwent major changes with the prevalence of Mexican Formula Pictures. A first shift is noticeable shortly after the end of the Golden Age. No longer did classes mingle; rather, they officially segregated into two categories.[30] At first-class theaters (*cines de primera),* North American and other foreign films premiered. The second-class theaters (*cines de segunda*) screened re-runs of the Hollywood productions and Mexican Formula Pictures (D. Maciel 1999: 202; Tuñón 1998: 62).

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the United States attendance at theaters dropped shortly after the introduction of television, throughout Latin America the process took significantly longer and was most noticeable after the mid 1980s (García Canclini et al. 1994: 161).

[30] Carlos Monsiváis s in his article *Vino todo el pueblo pero no cupo en la pantalla* (All the people came but did not fit onto the screen) that during the Golden Age audiences were united, all watching the same films, in the same cinemas. His idealistic understanding of the audience can however be questioned. I would argue that people attended cinemas in their neighborhoods, which were clearly inhabited by a rather unanimous class.

Ill. 18: Theaters either aimed at the lower or the higher social strata. This picture shows the opening of the theater *Victoria* for Latinos in Texas, in the 1950s.

First- and second-class theaters differed remarkably in infrastructure. The former were luxurious theaters that were generally laid out with carpets, paintings on the walls, and equipped with comfortable furniture and modern technologies (Noble 2005: 77). On the other end of the scale, second-class theaters, mostly converted theater stages (the so-called *carpas),* were only equipped with the basics — a screen, a projector, and chairs to sit on. These venues often combined screenings with short vaudeville acts. The middle class usually attended the first-class theaters, the working populace went to the second-class houses (Noble 2005: 77). Between the late 1950s and the late 1980s, exhibition practices led to a more complex categorization of theaters. Some exclusively exhibited foreign films; others screened national productions, and yet others specialized in auteur films or Mexican Formula Pictures. Some screened only premieres; others only offered second releases. In Tijuana, for example, Formula Pictures were exhibited at several theaters. *Cinelandia*, nicknamed *piojito* (flea hole), was located in the center of the market. For decades it was an important meeting point. Screening mainly low-budget Mexican movies, it attracted a public of lower social classes who did not only come to the theaters to watch movies, but also to eat a bite at the snack bar located inside the theater or just hang out. Up into the 1990s, films were usually shown all day and, by purchasing a ticket, one was allowed to stay for several screenings (Valenzuela Arce 1994: 308).[31] Another movie theater for Mexican Formula Pictures was the *Roble,*

[31] Oftentimes, the films were exhibited in these theaters only several months or years after they premiered in Mexico City (Valenzuela Arce 1994: 309).

premiering comedies and films on border issues. After a couple of weeks, these films went on to be exhibited at the cinema *Variedades*, before ending up at Tijuana's oldest and cheapest theater *Zaragoza* in front of mostly illiterate audiences (Iglesias 1991: 96–98).

Despite the decreasing numbers in movie attendance[32], additional theaters were opened across Mexico. In 1977, around 2,700 theaters were counted (in 1955 calculations result in 1,000) (Camara 1978a: 21). However, these statistics are deceptive and might lead to misinterpretations. In fact, only approximately 50 percent of all theaters were open to the public all year round. A majority of venues in the provinces functioned only on weekends; others closed depending on weather conditions (Camara 1978a: 21; 1980: 16). Generally, theaters tended to be smaller than in the Golden Age (Romero and Bertol 1981: 10). Statistics further depict the difference of theater density across the country. Although numbers rose constantly as more people migrated to Mexico City, the capital still had relatively few theaters per inhabitant (Romero and Bertol 1981: 10). Other states such as Jalisco and Michoacán each had twice as many theaters as Mexico City. Also, the northern States Chihuahua and Sinaloa, close to the U.S. border, were among the states with the majority of theaters. Others, such as Tlaxcala or Querétaro, only counted a handful (Camara 1978b: 19; 1984c: 14). Exhibition practices and programming varied significantly between cities and rural areas. Theaters in the countryside screened almost exclusively Mexican films (Camara 1978a: 21; 1980: 16). In Mexico City, significantly fewer national productions were exhibited and preference was given to foreign films. Mexican films therefore continued to wait for their exhibition slot, and the problem known as *enlatamiento*[33] continued to be an issue. The collective Alejandro Galindo states that in the mid 1980s, films usually premiered at theaters eleven months after the end of the shooting. In 1986, over one hundred films were withheld from the distribution circuit in the capital (A. C. Galindo 1987a: 13). To reduce the numbers of withheld films, more films premiered but remained in theaters for a shorter time period. In 1985, the average duration of a Mexican film staying in Mexican theaters was 6 weeks; in 1986, it dropped to 5 weeks. Concurrently, the average number of circulation copies increased (1985: 14) (Reyna Bernal 1987: 38–39). As a result, more films came out, but the revenue for each one was lower due to the reduction of exhibition time. Although rural audiences demanded more Mexican

[32] When audiences began to attend theaters in Mexico less frequently, the competing exhibition forms were not held responsible, but rather other reasons were attributed. Mainly, theaters were accused of not keeping up with hygiene standards. The equipment was often in bad condition; seats, carpets, or even the screens were torn, and the theaters didn't provide sufficient security (Ugalde Romero 1982a: 4; Vial 1982: 3). In several articles published in the trade journal *Camara*, managers and owners were directly addressed and solicited to improve conditions. Under the title *cines amigos del público* (friends of the cinema audience), step by step instructions were given on how to make improvements — from the friendliness of the staff to the importance of providing soap dispensers in restrooms (Vial 1982: 3).

[33] See also page 54.

material (Camara 1978a: 21; 1980: 16), films were rarely first released in the provinces because producers preferred to premiere them in the capital where the Mexican press was present. To respond to the higher demand for Mexican Formula Pictures in rural areas, old films were simply re-released. The same strategy was used during temporary downfalls in the production volume.

Both in Mexico and the United States, the Mexican Formula Pictures were usually programmed as double or even triple features (a common exhibiton practice worldwide). In the United States, they commonly alternated every week. Only exceptionally did they remain at the box office for several weeks (Rohrer 2010d, 2010a, 2010b). The first film of the program was usually a premiere or a recently released feature. The second, and eventually the third film, would have been either previously released or were simply less of a crowd pleaser.

Re-use of Downtown Cinemas and Drive-Ins, Accompanied by Shows in the United States

The exhibition particularities of Mexican Formula Pictures in the United States clearly differ from the ones in Mexico. Although movie attendance decreased across the United States since the 1950s and despite the fact that Spanish-language cinemas lost some of their spectators due to the competing exhibition forms, going to the movies was still the favorite leisure time activity for Latinos living in the United States in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Over the years, moviegoing had become a ritual practiced with friends and family. In Los Angeles, attending theaters was even more popular than visits to parks and restaurants. For undocumented migrants — often working in the United States without their families — attending the cinema was probably one of the only spare time activities practiced (Camara 1984d: 7). Not only did Latinos enjoy going to the movies, they also did it frequently: 62 percent of participants in a study conducted by the State university of California claimed to have visited the theater to watch Spanish-language films at least once a month, 15 percent went on a weekly basis, and 18 percent attended less than once a month (Camara 1984d: 7). Although the study was limited to the Los Angeles area, similar tendencies could probably be observed among the Latino audience in other parts of the country.

Two shifts had a major impact on the theater venues where Mexican formula films were screened. First, in the late 1950s and through the 1960s, the downtown areas were gradually abandoned and impoverished neighborhoods grew around them. The American middle class moved to the suburbs where new multiplex cinemas located within shopping centers became a common and profitable exhibition form (Monaco 2001: 42, 48). The downtown cinema houses constructed in the 1920s were abandoned, converted and used for other purposes. Those that remained theaters frequently became venues for art or porn films. Others however were reopened to target ethnic groups, residing in the downtown area, mostly blacks and Latinos. The increasing number of Spanish-speakers probably had the most profound impact on the reuse of the downtown

theaters. Exhibitors turned their attention to this constantly expanding audience and generally made good profits by showing exclusively Spanish-language films (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 33). In 1951, an estimated 680 screens across the United States — including movie theaters, clubs, schools, and churches — screened Spanish-language films (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 8). In the 1980s, there were around 500 theaters generating an estimated 45 million U.S. dollars a year (Azteca Films 1980; Klain 1980a). Most of the theaters were located in Texas, California, and Florida. Although Colorado, Chicago, and New York had significantly fewer Spanish-language theaters, the distributor *Azteca Films* still ran a separate office in these regions (Azteca Films 1980).

The drive-in theaters were the second venue for the exhibition of Mexican Formula Pictures. In 1958, a peak of over 6,000 drive-in movie theaters was counted across the United States. Nevertheless, with the emergence of the multiplex, the drive-ins lost their Anglo audience, who — according to Monaco — often considered the drive-ins a second-class movie experience (2001: 47). Drive-ins mostly exhibited second runs, and the exhibition quality suffered; the projected image was inferior to a movie theater experience, and the audio came out of small speakers or was later transmitted over the radio. For Mexican Formula Pictures the poor sound and image of the drive-ins were of minor importance, as the production values, aesthetics and sound quality of these films were de facto quite low. For many Latinos who traditionally went to the cinema as a family, the drive-in had another advantage: kids could easily be brought along and nap in the back of the car. On the other hand in Mexico, drive-ins were the dernier cri, offering an unusual viewing experience at a very high cost and exclusively showing Hollywood fare (Camara 1978b: 20; Romero and Bertol 1981: 10).

In the United States, talent shows called *aficionados* (passionate fans) were regularly presented between the first and the second screening at movie theaters. A band was present and amateur singers could perform their own song. After each show and at the end of the year, prizes, ranging from $5 to a car or a record deal, were awarded (Rohrer 2010d, 2010b, 2010c). The competitions got the public truly involved and made the visit to the theater more attractive (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 12). The owner of the Bay Theater in San Diego underlines the importance of music in the cinema: "*Aquí vienen a cantar sus canciones sintiendose orgullosos de ellos*" (They come here to sing their songs and are proud of themselves) (in Iglesias 1991: 112). Through these activities, the audience was kept engaged and stimulated to participate. Often, the audience loudly urged heroes to watch out or sing along famous musical themes (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 15). Actors accompanying the screenings or short performances before the films also drew people to the cinema. For exhibitors the presence of stars guaranteed a full house.

In the late 1980s, the number of theaters screening Mexican Formula Pictures decreased in Mexico as well as in the United States — a development that was partly caused by alternative exhibition modes. Fewer films were produced and often they went directly to

video. Previously exhibited films were no longer re-released in theaters, as the films were available on video and aired on television. Responding to this trend, some exhibitors installed video rental stores or simply sold videos in the lobby of their theater. The Agrasánchez family, for example, offered a selection of about 300 videos (Rohrer 2010c). The exhibitor Ramón Medrano, who owned several cinemas, did not run a video business himself, but his son opened one (Rohrer 2010a). The industry journal writes *"...No hay una gran diferencia entre vender palomitas de maíz y vender una cinta de video*" (There is no big difference between selling popcorn and videos) (Camara 1984a: 15). Not all of these entrepreneurial endeavors were successful however and few of them actually prevailed. They can be seen as attempts to react to the new exhibition trends.

Video and Piracy

From the mid 1980s onward, Mexican Formula Pictures were often watched at home on video or on television.[34] This gradual shift in consumption was favored by four developments. First, many Mexican household acquired television sets and VCR players. Second, video rental stores opened across Mexico and the border region of the United States. Third, migration laws in the United States became stricter and many migrants feared controls at theaters. Finally, videos could easily be copied and pirated copies were for sale across territories.

In the 1980s, the distribution of videos skyrocketed and VHR players soon belonged to the inventory of most Mexican households. By 1989, over fifty percent of Mexico City's homes were equipped with video-players, with the highest density among lower income families (García Canclini et al. 1994: 161). In the provinces, numbers were considerably lower (Quintal Avilés and Reyes Domínguez 1994: 280; Sánchez Ruiz 1993: 239). Watching movies on video became part of people's media consumption habits after the establishment of video rental stores and the wide availability of pirated copies.[35] Video rental stores offered a variety of films for members at relatively low costs. While independent small businesses carried a large variety of Mexican films, big corporations such as *Videovisión*, the U.S. company *Multivideo*, and later on the U.S. company *Blockbuster*, all specialized in U.S. box office hits (Sánchez Ruiz 1993: 241). Mexican Formula Pictures were among the favorite rentals at independent video stores; nonetheless, slight regional differences did exist. According to Sánchez Ruiz, action, drug trafficking, and sexy movies were among the most checked out in Guadalajara (1993: 242). In Mérida, renters preferred similar genres and comedies ranked even higher (Quintal Avilés and Reyes Domínguez 1994: 282). In Tijuana, action, drama,

[34] I come to this conclusion by the means of interviews, old television programs and ratings as well as video rental hitlists.

[35] No reliable statistics exist for the 1980s, neither on video rental stores nor on piracy. Data provided for the early to mid 1990s show that almost 10'000 video rental stores were counted in Mexico, with a higher density in the cities than in the country side (García Canclini et al. 1994: 161).

and comedy scored among the favorites (Valenzuela Arce 1994: 318). The situation was slightly different in Mexico City. To assure the quality of video circulation, the state launched an initiative to promote quality films on video. Around 300 features were selected, all corresponding to the following criteria: they had to be internationally successful with film critics and further reading had to be available (García Canclini et al. 1994: 167). This 'culturally valuable' package could be acquired for a low price and many video rentals stores in Mexico City did include these films in their selection.[36]

Video stores serving the Mexican and Latino communities in the United States carried hundreds of titles, mostly border films and sexy movies. To date, these films, as well as more recent low-budget productions, are still offered in Latino neighborhoods, or they can be ordered online. In 2001, Maria Arbelaez created a hit list of popular movies through a survey conducted in communities where the majority of the population is either Mexican born or of Mexican descent. Most films mentioned center on stars such as Rosa Gloria Chagoyán, the Almada brothers, Angelica Chain (Camelia, La Tejana), and *La India María*. Following in popularity are films with *Cantinflas* and other stars of the classical era (2001: 642).

Ill. 19: Mexican Formula Pictures are among the favorites at video rental stores in the United States.

[36] In Mexico City, the video rental stores were often integrated in libraries. This automatically attracted different customers.

The Simpson-Rodino law (1986) was yet another factor contributing to the increasing proliferation of video exhibition among Latinos in the United States. Out of fear from persecution and deportation, undocumented migrants steered clear of movie theaters — previously a popular meeting place for migrants. In certain states, theaters catering to Latinos were no longer a carefree zone, but were sometimes searched by U.S. officials.[37] The Mexican producer Rafael Pérez Grovas comments on the impact of the Simpson-Rodino Law:

> …mexicanos ya no van en la misma cantidad de asistentes a las salas de cine mexicano porque se les persiguió mucho, sobre todo en los lugares de reunión… En los lugares de reunión de estas personas, de mojados, llegaba de repente la policía y hacía redadas, y pescaban a los mexicanos que no tuvieran su documentación en regla. Eso hizo que mucha gente se ahuyentara del los cines (Rafael Pérez Grovas in Iglesias 1991: 102).

> …Mexicans attend theaters screening Mexican films less frequently, because they were often tracked down, especially in places where these migrants, the wetbacks, met. All of a sudden the police would come and make a raid and arrest the Mexicans who did not have their papers in order. That is why they avoided these theaters (Rafael Pérez Grovas in Iglesias 1991: 102).

Ill. 20: Most Mexican Formula Pictures are for sale as pirated copies, in street markets in Mexico, the United States and across Latin America.

[37] In the conducted interviews, exhibitors had different views on the handling of migrants at theaters. In Texas, exhibitors believed that the Simpson-Rodino law had no influence. Exhibitors in other States do however talk about its impact.

Along with the introduction of video, pirated copies became widely available, offering a cheaper alternative for consumers (García Canclini et al. 1994: 198). In cities across Mexico, at metro and bus stations, as well as in markets, pirated copies went out for sale. Soon after the introduction of pirated copies, consumers with limited funds started to buy these goods instead of renting from video stores or going to the movies, for which prices were considerably higher (García Canclini et al. 1994: 198). While the inferior quality of the illegal copies might be an issue for films with high production values, quality does not play a crucial role for Mexican Formula Pictures. The circulation of cheap illegal copies across borders contributed significantly to the wide proliferation of these films and influenced the content and aesthetics of low-budget movies in other Latin American countries. Film scholar Gabriela Alemán points to piracy in the form of transnational elements in Ecuadorian exploitation films, which are considerably indebted to the Mexican border and drug films that often start out with a *corrido* (Mexican ballad) (Alemán 2009: 268).

Television: Embracing Formula Pictures

In the 1980s, audiences began to watch significantly more feature films on television (Getino 1998: 27). According to a content analysis by Enrique Sánquez Ruiz, feature films (including Formula Pictures) made up the second largest segment of Mexican television programming after the news.[38] During prime time (7 p.m. to 11 p.m.), Mexican feature films made up the majority (Sánchez Ruiz 1993: 235). In the 1980s, private television (*Televisa*) and state-supported channels only imported a small percentage of their program content from the United States (around 20 percent). Retrospectively, Mexican television scholar Sánchez Ruiz labels the 1980s as a period of "Mexicanisation" (2000). He contrasts this with the 1990s, when the programming of U.S. American content significantly increased, making up more than 50 percent of the schedule (Sánchez Ruiz 2000). The Mexican Formula Pictures, many of them with character types such as *La India María* or *El Chavo del Ocho*, which originally had emerged from television, were frequently aired on television. Audiences seemed particularly fond of these types(Sánchez Ruiz 1993: 236).[39] In addition, the low production values of the films corresponded perfectly to the quality of television aesthetics.

Another factor contributing to the rise of Mexican Formula Pictures on television was Echeverría's negative stance on these films, which he gradually tried to ban from theaters. By nationalizing distribution as well as exhibition companies, the state's

[38] This holds true for both the years 1984 and 1990, during which he conducted his study.

[39] According to Sánchez Ruiz, interviewees of the lower strata of society enjoyed *telenovelas*, action series, and comedies the most (Sánchez Ruiz 1993: 236). See also Quintal Avilés and Reyes Domínguez (1994: 278). In Mexico, cable television did not play a pivotal role in the exhibition of Formula Pictures. Introduced in 1986, it offered a predominantly U.S. American content. The service was very expensive and therefore consumers with a higher income subscribed to it (García Canclini et al. 1994: 220)

control in the theatrical division was considerably high. Although Echeverría did try to intervene in television broadcasting with the goal of establishing and reinforcing the role of the state, private entrepreneurs merged to prevent more regulations and challenge the increasing competition from state channels. Contrary to the state owned channels, *Televisa's* private network exhibited comedies and action films, and contributed to the increasing presence of Formula Pictures on television.

In the U.S. American context, I wish to differentiate between the Formula Pictures aired on Spanish-Language channels and the ones that were modified and aired on independent American channels. Commonly, Mexican films and *telenovelas* were aired on the network *Univisión*[40] with the majority of its shares held by *Televisa*. In 1986, the network could claim 409 outlets, reaching 83 percent of Spanish-speaking households or 15 million viewers, having no commercial competition from other networks (Sinclair 1999: 101). The company fed all its channels with mainly Mexican content, mostly Formula Pictures aimed at a Latino audience composed of different nationalities.[41] *Telemundo*, a corporation backed with 'Anglo' capital from Wall Street, entered the market as the first real rival (Sinclair 2004a: 12). Nevertheless, *Televisa* continued to provide a majority of the content for the Spanish-language network through one of its subsidiaries under the *Univisa* umbrella. Besides distributing in-house produced features and other Formula Pictures, *Univisa* became active in video manufacturing and created *Galavisión*, a cable television network, which became one of the main exhibitors of Formula Pictures in the 1980s.[42]

Furthermore, a large number of Spanish-spoken Mexican films containing horror, fantasy, and science-fiction elements, among them some Mexican Formula Pictures, were dubbed into English and released on independent television in the United States, mostly through the television branch of *American-International Pictures* (AIP-TV) (Syder and Tierney 2005: 33). The two key figures for the import and distribution of Mexican Formula Pictures were producers Jerry Warren and K. Gordon Murray (Syder and Tierney 2005: 33). Both of them dubbed and sometimes drastically changed the cheaply acquired films to fit the needs of the Anglo audience. Often characters were renamed; the wrestling hero *El Santo* for example became *Samson* in the English

[40] Former Spanish International Communication Corporation (SICC).

[41] *Televisa*'s hegemonic position was found to be illegal in 1987. The company was forced to significantly reduce its shares and thereby lost control over *Univisión* (Sinclair 2004a: 14). In the following years, Hallmark ended up running *Univisión* (Sinclair 1999: 106, 07).

[42] Although Latinos were an increasingly important consumer group, it took a while until the Hispanic Television Rating System was introduced in the early 1990s (Sinclair 2004a: 13). The U.S. networks were also reluctant to launch channels aiming at Latino audiences. By the early 1990s, they finally penetrated the Spanish-language market by introducing their own Latino-channels. CNN transmitted its program in the United States as well as across Latin America. Time-Warner launched its own movie channel HBO olé. Over the years, Discovery, Fox Latin America, MTV Latino and others joined (Sinclair 1999: 114–15).

version. Furthermore they changed the musical scores, replacing Mexican music with rock n' roll or other music they thought would sound more appealing to teenagers and late night television audiences. Besides replacing some of the original footage, Warren and Murray underlined their own involvement by changing the credits, adding their own title card "supervised by" followed by their handwritten signature, thereby setting it apart from the other credits (Syder and Tierney 2005: 48). Warren and Murray's films were packaged with a variety of other low-budget films from around the globe, all of which were re-adapted for particular audiences through similar techniques (Syder and Tierney 2005: 48).

Across Latin America

Up to this point, I have limited my explanations to the circulation of Mexican Formula Pictures across Mexico and the United States. Nevertheless, they have circulated across Latin America and even Europe and their exhibition in these regions deserves a few explanatory notes.

During the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, Latin America and Spain were important distribution territories for the Mexican film industry. Particularly during World War II, Mexico produced more films than any other country in Latin America. Consequently, Mexican films dominated screens across the vast Spanish-speaking territory. However, in the late 1970s and during the 1980s, distribution and exhibition in parts of Latin America became increasingly difficult. First of all, the period was marked by instability. Political regimes were overthrown and new ones imposed. Several countries were hit by economic crises leading to the devaluation of their respective national currencies. In Bolivia for example, the exchange rate went from 40 Bolivian pesos for 1 dollar, to 2,000 within a couple of years. Peru shared a similar situation (Camara 1984b: 2). Inflation rates were at such high levels that literarily no profits could be made. Private producers no longer had a reason to distribute their films in these regions. Instead of being exhibited at theaters, Mexican Formula Pictures were distributed on video. Even more common were pirated copies that were sold in local markets.

In other Latin American countries, among them Colombia and Venezuela, exchange rates were stable and private producers showed a continuing interest in distributing their films. In Colombia, as in Mexico, cinemas were divided by class; in Spanish they were known as theaters for *los de arriba* (the ones from above) and *los de abajo* (the ones from below) (Gómez Ocampo 1997: 177). Mexican Formula Pictures were exhibited in the latter ones along with cheap films from other countries. Similar to the United States and Mexico, two movies were shown for the cost of one, and they ran continuously from the morning until midnight. Commonly, people could walk into the theater at any time (Gómez Ocampo 1997: 179f.).

An additional factor hindering the wide distribution across Latin America was censorship. Regulations were different in each country; sometimes they varied from state to state. In Ecuador for example, decisions could differ from Quito to Cuenca (Camara 1984b: 2). Like in Mexico, changing political regimes interpreted censorship regulations on an individual basis. In the end, it came down to the person who was actually in charge. Overall, it can be stated that Latin America became a territory of decreasing importance for the Mexican film industry. The producer Rafael Pérez Grovas estimates that Latin American territories generated only 10 percent of the revenues of a Mexican production; previously, it had been 50 percent (Iglesias 1991: 100).

Very few Mexican Formula Pictures were actually distributed and exhibited in Europe, even though *Películas mexicanas* had a branch in Paris. If the films did get picked up, local distributors literarily produced their own versions of them. They chose titles that appealed to their national audience, and characters were renamed; *El Santo*, for example, became *Superman* in the German version. Just as in the U.S. versions, certain scenes were cut and replaced with material that seemed more intriguing to the respective national audiences. For some films, pornographic versions were shot and edited.[43]

[43] To this date, it is still uncertain how many pornographic versions exist. Rogelio Agrasánchez is in possession of promotional materials of some of these films. Additionally, Viviana García Besné unravels many production stories of the family business "Calderon" in her documentary PERDIDA / LOSS (ES, 2010). Most importantly, her research resulted in the retrieval of some of the reels of the pornographic versions.

Ill. 21: When exported Mexican Formula Pictures were ammended and 'new' versions created. Here an example from the *Agrasánchez* collection.

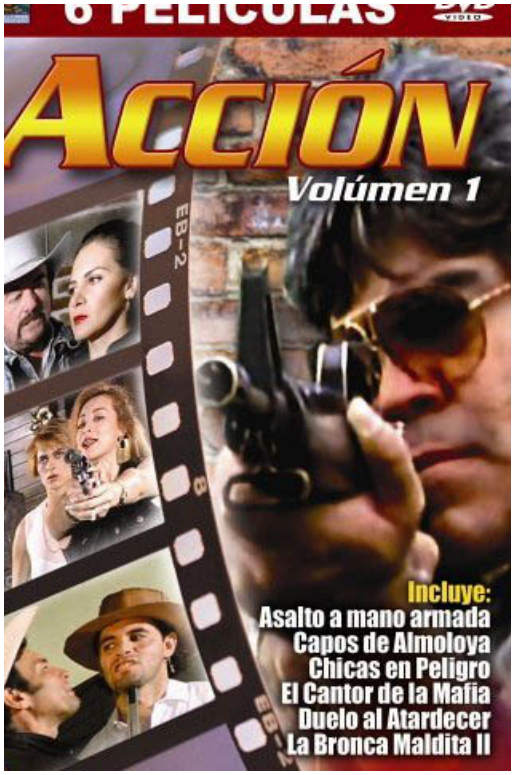
To sum up, Mexican Formula Pictures were distributed and exhibited across national borders. They were shown at movie theaters, on television, and circulated on video or as pirated copies in different territories.

Advertising

Finally, to complete this chapter on circulation, I wish to outline some practices used to advertise Mexican Formula Pictures. American and Mexican distributors relied heavily on graphic advertising to sell the Formula Pictures. For theatrical release, ads were placed in newspapers; exhibitors used posters, window and lobby cards. Promotional materials for on screen and up-coming films were exposed in and in front of theaters in Mexico and the United States. Little effort was made to distinguish one film from another, but rather, the material stressed the key attributes of the films: the body spectacle, the character types, and the names of known performers. Commonly, the posters and advertisements depicted the main hero in a variety of scenes. Often, cartoon drawings were intertwined with film stills destined to newspaper advertisements or posters. Many posters were drawings of a variety of characters combined with key elements or scenes from the film. Despite the similarities, for each of the four outlined categories (wrestling, sexy movies, border films, and antihero comedies), different key elements were stressed and visually enhanced. To advertise the wrestling films, the

muscular body of the fighter was emphasized. Sexy movies focused on female body parts such as the buttocks or the breasts, which were highlighted and often shown tightly framed covering the entire size of the poster. Some ads featured women in skimpy outfits and lascivious poses. The border films shocked with the depiction of extreme violence or the faces of male stars combined with guns or other props. Posters for the comedies commonly stressed the infantile attributes of the character types.

Some distributors also provided trailers for the theatrical release, at times lasting almost ten minutes (Grant 1982: 14). As for the VHS, DVD and television releases, trailers were and still are an important marketing tool. At the beginning of every VHS or DVD, several trailers (which on DVD sometimes cannot be skipped) try to stimulate an interest in other films. DVD box sets, combining a series of films of the same genre or with the same performer are also common.



Ill. 22: Today, DVD collection box sets of Mexican Formula Pictures are sold on the market, uniting similar films.

Often, the same advertising materials were used for the VHS and DVD release. However, by the time the films were released on VHS or DVD, the titles of the films — often based on popular sayings or ballads — had widely circulated.[44] Consequently, relatively few marketing efforts were made for DVD and VHS releases. On television, individual films were generally not advertised, but the programming slot framed the films within a certain predefined context.

In addition, the exhibitor sent press books provided by distributors to local radio stations. A moderator would read one or several short advertising texts or catchy lines

[44] In some cases titles were changed for the video and DVD release.

on-air, and exhibitors also sent pre-recorded spots to the stations. For LAS LUCHADORAS CONTRA EL ROBOT ASESINO / THE WRESTLING WOMEN AGAINST THE KILLER ROBOT (René Cardona, MX, 1969), a pornographic version named EL ASESINO LOCO Y EL SEXO / THE CRAZY KILLER AND SEX was released featuring women whose clothes are ripped off by an evil monster. The press book for the films contains phrases such as *La violencia sexual de desborda!* (Bursting sexual violence!) to draw people to the movie theater. Or, if more details were to be revealed, the text went as follows:

> Ávido de dominar el mundo, el Dr. Orlak pretende crear hombres de fuerza extraordinaria que solo obedezcan sus mandates. Su máxima creación es Karfay, zombi mudo y de monstruoso aspecto que se solaza en escapar y atacar sexualmente a bellas mujeres… A colores con Joaquín Cordero, Regina Torne, Hector Lechuga, Malu Reyes, Carlos Agosti… Pronto en su cine.
>
> Eager to rule the world, Dr. Orlak pretends to create a man with extraordinary powers who only follows his orders. His latest and greatest creation is Karfay, a silent zombie. For fun he escapes and attacks beautiful women… In color, with Joaquín Cordero, Regina Torne, Hector Lechuga, Malu Reyes, Carlos Agosti… Soon in theaters near you.

The lines for the radio spots vary from film to film. Nevertheless, they all follow a similar pattern. Catchy sentences point to the extraordinary spectacle in the advertised film. The longer version gives a couple of hints about the story and usually the most known actors are listed.

Sometimes, exhibitors made a special effort, they mounted posters and loudspeakers on a pickup truck and drove around the neighborhoods announcing the theater's program along with its highlights (Rohrer 2010d, 2010b). Shouting out the names of the character types or of the stars impersonating them was another method to attract the crowds. The simple fact that a movie was either a *Cantinflas* or an *India María* film was reason enough for people to attend the theater. Using the popularity of a character type across different media formats became a common way to promote new films. Similarly, the appearance of stars such as the Almadas, Jorge Rivero, Isela Vega, or Rosa Gloría Chagoyán, seemed to work.

Contrary to watching a film at home — on television or video — going to the movie theater was a truly collective experience often shared with friends and family (Elizondo 1991: 27). The latter was stressed by exhibitors in the marketing of the films for their theatrical release. As previously outlined, some of the theaters featured live performances. Sometimes, exhibitors booked performances by famous actors and singers before or during the screening to make the visit to the cinema more exciting (Amador 1983: 33). Other times, they performed short sketches themselves. The Texan exhibitor Rick Ruenes for instance described to me how his entire family had to participate in the show staged before the film (Rohrer 2010b). Particularly in the United States, the performances became very common, attracting fans and large audiences willing to pay a little extra.

As shown, exhibitors used various methods to draw the crowds to the movie theaters. Besides traditional advertising strategies such as the foregrounding of star performers or the outlining of spectacular stories, live events were organized in order to make screenings more attractive. Advertising for video and television releases, on the other hand, was less important, as the films were already known at the time of their release on these supports.

The *India María* Films — Case Study of a Mexican Formula Phenomenon

After this overview of the characteristics of Mexican Formula Pictures, I now introduce my primary subject of investigation *La India María* and situate her within the realm of Mexican Formula Pictures. Not only are María Elena Velasco's films, television series, and her character exemplary of the Mexican Formula Pictures (antihero comedies), she is also singular and she is one of the few characters and performers to have reached star status across geographical borders. First, I sketch out her appearances across media throughout her career; then I layout the production context as well as the distribution, which again need to be situated within the respective historical context.

Appearances Across Media Formats

The *India María* character could be described as a naïve indigenous woman, humble and good-hearted. Nevertheless, she possesses a distinctive inner strength and persistence, particularly standing out because of her marked ethnicity and slapstick performance. Her appearance as an illiterate uneducated woman of the lower class is consistent throughout all of her films, television series and in the theater. Just as other character types and their respective star performers such as *Cantinflas* or *Chespirito*, *La India María* has moved across different genres and media. Between 1971 and today, Velasco has impersonated *La India María* in sixteen feature films and numerous television shows. Over the span of her career, the character has also appeared on different theater stages performing comical routines. Additionally, she starred in commercials and recorded several albums. Velasco's appearance across media is exemplary for Mexican Formula Pictures. More precisely, the *India María* character and films belong to the thematic category of antihero comedies — combining physical comedy with innocent humor.

Theater

Velasco debuted in the theater, where she originally performed musical routines in scanty outfits. Soon she moved on to vaudeville stages such as the *Teatro Tivoli*, the *Blanquita*, *1001 Nights*, and the *Burro* (Donkey), appearing as a supporting actress for male comedians. Among them were *Piporro* and *Resortes* who later frequently acted in the features starring *La India María* (Fernández Escareño 1996: 120; Ricalde Castro 2007: 2).[45]

[45] The comedian *Resortes* (Adalberto Martínez Chávez) appeared in hundreds of antihero comedies and telenovelas over a span of more than 70 years. He started out his career in the circus then moved to the theater, where he became known for his childish way of dancing. Contrary to other comedians whose careers peak at a particular moment, *Resortes* remained popular for decades. The performer Eulalio González *Piporro*, on the other hand, was characterized by his northern slang (*norteño*) and his rural attitudes. He landed a series of big box-office hits, namely EL TERROR DE LA FRONTERA / TERROR ON THE BORDER (Zacarías Gómez Urquiza, MX, 1962) and EL REY DEL TOMATE / THE KING OF THE TOMATO (Miguel M. Delgado, MX, 1962). In the latter, he plays a simple farmer who tries to sell tomatoes in a

Ill. 23 and Ill. 24: María Elena Velasco started out her career as a dancer, moves on to the theater to support male comedians, before she created her own character.

In the theater, Velasco met Julián de Meriche, a dancer and choreographer, who later became her husband.[46] He encouraged her to appear solo and to create her own character. Shortly afterwards, in the late 1960s, the first version of the *India María* character appeared on stage. At the time, the character still wore makeup, had bangs, and her clothing did not specifically identify her with a specific ethnic group.

local market, but he constantly gets into trouble with a monopoly trying to squeeze out independent farmers. Similarly, luck is not on his side in EL TERROR DE LA FRONTERA. He is shot in a fight over a woman, but surprisingly returns to the town after his death. Like many others, *Piporro* did not limit himself to comedies, but crossed genres and acted in replicas of Hollywood monster films, all the while maintaining his character type (García Riera 1998: 223).

[46] His birth name was Vladmir Lipkies and he was of Polish and Russian origin. He passed away in 1974 when Velasco was already a well-known performer. Later on, she established her own production company and named it after her husband's first name.

Ill. 25: The original version of *La India María* played her sketches on the vaudeville stages in Mexico City.

La India María soon became a favorite on vaudeville stages in Mexico City. Although she subsequently became widely known through her television and film appearances, she has never turned her back on live stage performances. Throughout her career and to this date, she continues to perform her comic routines. Most commonly, she presents her shows at *ferias* (annual fairs which are celebrated on the day of a village saint) as part of a program consisting of musical performances and bullfights. On other occasions, she has been invited to female prisons where she staged her sketches, performed comical dances, and sang. At times, she also performs at private events such

as Christmas celebrations of Mexican corporations (Rohrer 2008). In the United States, she showcased on different theater stages, among others at the Million Dollar Hotel in Los Angeles, as well as in amusement parks such as *Disneyland* and *Sixflags Magic Mountain* (anonymous 1975, 1976; Grant 1982). In 1994, Velasco returned to the stage she originally debuted on, the theater *Blanquita*, with the musical *México canta y aguanta* (Mexico sings and lives through rough times), for which she wrote the script and directed the musical routines. In *México canta y aguanta* — consisting of songs and dances — *La India María* is chased by policemen who accuse her for no obvious reason, while a teacher wants to convince her to finally learn to read and write. The show was sold out in Mexico City over 200 times and subsequently toured around Mexico for over a year (Villaseñor 1994).

Ill. 26: In the play "*Mexico canta y aguanta*" *La India María's* meanders through Mexico's history and stumbles upon folkloristic songs and dances along with corrupted Mexican bureaucrats.

Overall, it could be stated that the *India María* character, besides having emerged from the theater, has constantly reinforced her position with live performances. To this date, her musical and dance routines have attracted large audiences and the theater stage allowed Velasco to generate immediate responses to her acting. When asked what her best professional memories are, Velasco answered without hesitating: "*Las rutinas en vivo! Sobre todo en la cárcel!*" (The live performances! In particular the ones in prisons!) (Rohrer 2008).

Television Shows

In 1971, *La India María* moved into the limelight with her appearances on television. Interviewees — ranging from taxi drivers, to market vendors, or people in the street — repeatedly mention they initially know the character from television.[47] Significantly, I outline here the character's links to television and the shows produced exclusively for this medium. The format SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO / ALWAYS ON SUNDAYS (MX, 1961–1995), hosted by Raúl Velasco[48], led to *La India María*'s breakthrough on television in 1971. SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO was aired on *Canal de las Estrellas* (The channel of the Stars), *Televisa's* most important station in terms of audience ratings. Although the show was broadcast for almost thirty years, maximum ratings were reached during the launching of *La India María* with approximately 400 million viewers (Betanzo 1998: 19; Ricalde Castro 2004a: 202). With SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO *La India María* won the hearts of television audiences with her comic performance and naive admiration for the host of the show.[49] Her presence in SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO is made believe to be coincidental. In fact, she is simply an indigenous woman selling fruit in front of the television studio. Raúl Velasco whom she calls *güero* (a Mexican term for a person with light complexion and/or someone who belongs to the upper class) — buys fruit from her. *La India María* falls in love with him and pursues him. She doesn't eschew any effort — in particular of physical nature — to get passed television's security and into his studio. She climbs, falls and flips over. Once in the show, nobody can stop her. She makes fun of the invited guests, narrates anecdotes from her life as a street vendor, and mocks officials and institutions, taking up most of the screen presence. Other aspects of her character stand out besides the predominance of physical routines. In all of her appearances, music plays a pivotal role. Often, *La India María* dances to the songs performed by invited musicians or sings herself. The show SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO was repeatedly denounced as being 'poorly crafted': often pre-recorded material was re-used, lips were badly synced, and fake musicians appeared on the show. Thus, from the beginning of her onscreen career, *La India María* was placed within the realm of low-budget entertainment.[50]

In 1971, the *India María* character appeared in another television program called REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE / NESCAFE SHOW as one of the main features of the show.

[47] During each of my research trips to Mexico, I asked people in the streets about their favorite characters and what media they knew them from.

[48] It is a coincidence that they have the same last name. There is no family relation between them.

[49] I have not analyzed all shows, but have limited myself to the materials that were accessible at no or low costs: Velasco's son Iván Lipkies placed at my disposal numerous VHS of the show SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO and REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE. He also recorded parts of ¡AY MARÍA QUÉ PUNTERÍA!.

[50] Rumor has it that Velasco was banned from Siempre en Domingo because of a political joke (Pelayo 1985). Even though she never confirmed this, chances are that her social criticism, disguised in the form of comedy, was critically observed by Telesistema Mexicano (Televisa) who was closely aligned to the Partido Revolucionario Institutional (PRI — Institutional Revolutionary Party) (Ricalde Castro 2004a: 204).

The program was actually a half hour long commercial for *Nescafé* enriched with musical numbers and comical routines. In the REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE a male presenter led the show, while a horde of almost-naked blond women performed dance routines, which *La India María* constantly interrupted with her comical intermezzos. After REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE, Velasco's character mainly appeared in feature films. It was only in 1998 that *La India María* temporarily returned to the small screen with a series of sketches. In ¡AY MARÍA QUÉ PUNTERÍA! / HEY MARIA WHAT A STUPIDITY she appeared in the lead role, wrote the script and directed the sketches. The show was composed of a series of comical routines containing numerous political sketches. It was aired on *Televisa's* canal 2, during prime time, at 10 p.m. (Tuesdays) and consisted of 13 programs (Mendoza de Lira 1998). After the first season, the show was cancelled and *La India María* only returned to television sporadically after that (J. C. Cuéllar 2003; B. A. Flores 2003; E. Hernández 2004).

Ill. 27: Velasco moved into the limelight through her appearances on television, here the guest of honor in a news show *24 horas* (24 hours), disguised as *La India María*.

Feature Films

Similar to Mexican Formula Pictures, films featuring *La India María* recycle stories and themes. As a result, almost all of the *India María* full length feature films contain obvious intertextual repetitions. Films are also marked by what is commonly considered as aesthetic flaws. On the following pages, I introduce her sixteen features in

chronological order with a short synopsis of each film. An extensive discussion of the films will take place in Part II.

TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (MX, 1972)
STUPID STUPID, BUT NOT THAT MUCH
by Fernando Cortés

La India María migrates to Mexico City where she works as a maid. She prevents the theft of valuable jewels and an insurance scam.

EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO (MX, 1973)
FEAR DOESN'T RIDE ON A DONKEY
by Fernando Cortés

La India María stays at a haunted house. In order to protect a cat, she must fight an arsenal of monsters.

POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! (MX, 1973)
POOR BUT WITH HONOR
by Fernando Cortés

The question is: does *La India María* possess supernatural powers to cure illnesses? Her mysterious healings suggest she does.

LA MADRECITA (MX, 1974)
THE LITTLE NUN
by Fernando Cortés

La India María saves a catholic convent through unconventional means.

DURO PERO SEGURO (MX, 1975)
HARD BUT SURE
by Fernando Cortés

La India María sells *tacos* at a television studio, when rumor spreads that hitting her brings good luck. The beatings begin.

LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (MX, 1975)
THE PRESIDENT
by Fernando Cortés

By accident, *La India María* is elected president of the town. Once in office, she imposes her own rules on the rich and on the male population.

LA COMADRITA (MX, 1978)
THE FRIEND
by Fernando Cortés

Working as a maid in an upper class household, *La India María* proves that she knows to ride a motorbike, play soccer, and perform other physical feats.

SOR TEQUILA (MX, 1980)
NUN TEQUILA
by Rogelio González Jr.

As nun '*Tequila*' *La India María* is transferred to a small town where the local priest has established his regime. She fights him with unorthodox methods.

OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (MX, 1981)
by Gilberto Martínez Solares and María Elena Velasco

La India María unknowingly smuggles diamonds across the border to the United States and lives through various adventures.

EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (MX, 1982)
WHO DOESN'T RUN, FLIES
by Gilberto Martínez Solares

La India María is arrested for selling fruit in the streets of Mexico. She fights exploitative women in jail and after she is freed.

EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (MX, 1983)
THE FEATHERED COYOTE
by María Elena Velasco

La India María and her grandfather go to Acapulco to sell duplicates of Mayan artifacts. They end up being persecuted by a bunch of scoundrels.

NI CHANA, NI JUANA (MX, 1985)
NEITHER CHANA, NOR JUANA
by María Elena Velasco

Two twins (both impersonated by Velasco), separated at birth, reunite which leads to a series of entanglements.

NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (MX, 1988)
NEITHER FROM HERE, NOR FROM THERE
by María Elena Velasco

La India María goes to the United States and tries to make a living there. She ends up being constantly on the run.

SE EQUIVOCÓ LA CIGÜEÑA (MX, 1993)
THE STORK WAS WRONG
by María Elena Velasco

La India María accidently steals a 'white' baby and is pursued by the police.

LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (MX, 1999)
PLEASURES OF POWER
by Iván Lipkies

The confusion of two twin sisters (both impersonated by Velasco) leads to political uprisings.

LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA (MX, 2012)
THE DAUGHTER OF MOCTEZUMA
by Iván Lipkies

La India María is called by the Aztecan God Moctezuma to save Mexico's indigenous heritage.
This film is not released yet. Therefore it will not be analyzed in this dissertation.

Despite differences in storyline, the *India María* films share many similarities. Most importantly, all narratives are interrupted by spectacular slapstick routines. More precisely, the main protagonist breaks out into at least one dance number, fights against a bull, performs a song, or maneuvers a car or motorcycle through dangerous terrains. In several features, *La India María* also enters the ring to wrestle against her on-screen

opponents. The displayed attractions are predominantly based on the display of spectacular body action and interruptions of the linear narratives are mostly unmotivated. Furthermore, all features contain one or several popular songs, either performed in full length by an on-screen band or staged as dance numbers extra-diegetic sound. On the DVD edition of the films, the songs are listed in the main menu and can be watched independently from the story.

Additionally, the titles of the films clearly situate the features in the realm of popular culture. Several films featuring *La India María* take their titles from popular proverbs or songs. *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither from here, nor from there) for example is a common saying underlining the loss of culture and identity of Mexican immigrants in the United States. At the same time, it is the title of a Mexican ballad (*corrido*) widely known in Mexico and within the Mexican community in the United States. *El miedo no anda en burro* (fear doesn't ride on a donkey) is a proverb, signifying that fear cannot be foreseen. Similarly, *El que no corre… vuela!* (who doesn't run, flies) refers to everyday corruption, cleverness to achieve a goal or to baffle contenders. Across the spectrum of works, the character's ethnic background and social class give reason for several subplots and anecdotes. Finally, the clash of the urban with the rural is at the core of most films. I will extensively discuss all of the mentioned aspects in Part II, when I analyse the reception of *La India María*.

Much in the same way as Mexican Formula Pictures, *India María* films don't tap the 'full spectrum' of filmic expressions. Often they lack attention to detail. Camera movements are mostly motivated by characters and seldom framed longer than the duration of the action. Cameras are mostly at eye-level, high or low angle shots are seldom, as are tracking shots. Additionally, the camera only pans and tilts when characters move. Characters are mostly framed in long or medium shots, close-ups are rare and only used to enhance certain body parts. There is little subtlety in the color composition: lighting levels are not modulated; colors are often too bright or too bland. The lack of attention to detail is particularly conspicuous in the production design. Props and clothes often look amazingly cheap. Soundtracks are badly tempered: voices and background noises overlap. Musical tunes often lack a harmonic mixing, they sound hollow or are interspersed with clangors. Special effects are mostly inexistent or strikingly bad. EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO directed by Fernando Cortés, for example, contains elements and references to the horror genre. However, the makeup and movements of the monsters look incredibly artificial. Several films use fast-motion to create comic effects. In the films directed and later produced by Velasco, greater attention is paid to special effects. In one scene in NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ, a coffee pot and other machines explode. Although, the scene might not seem particularly spectacular, it triggered two articles in the Mexican press in which Velasco points to the dangers and complications of shooting it (Dávalos 1987; Pacheco 1987). Velasco also

underlined her particular attention to detail and her efforts to create special effects (Dávalos 1987).

Musical Albums and Commercials

Throughout this chapter, the importance of music has repeatedly been mentioned. In fact, music plays a key role in all *India María*'s films, television shows and her live performances. To this date, Velasco has recorded six albums for which she composed several songs. All albums were produced between 1968 and 1984 and they were released on vinyl (45rpm). Two albums unite ballads by famous performers with original pieces sung by Velasco. The rest consists of popular and original ballads sung by the performer. One album is entirely based on the ballad *El compromiso* (The compromise) from the film OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981). Two records released in the 1970s contain songs that bare no relations to the features. Titles such as *El tamal (*traditional Mexican corn dish) or *La chula* (cute Mexican girl) clearly refer to Mexican popular culture. Others such as *Juana la mojada* (Juana the migrant) touch on the theme of migration to the United States. All of the albums star *La India María* as a singer, only one album, namely *canciones románticas* (romantic songs) (1984), features Velasco and not her character (Lipkies 2010).

Ill. 28 and Ill. 29: Besides her appearances in 16 feature films as the character *India María*, Velasco also recorded four albums with Mexican songs.

India María films make the same use of music as other Mexican Formula Pictures; many of which are centered on certain songs, which fully or partially determine the story. As previously shown, actors and performers were expected to stage their musical routines live aside from their filmic appearances. Contrary to performers such as Vicente Fernández, Velasco never achieved outstanding success with her music.[51] Velasco with her personification of *La India María* was always primarily perceived as a performer that spiced up her routines with popular tunes.

[51] See page 14 for an introduction on performer Vicente Fernández.

Alongside her career in film, television and on stage, *La India María* appeared in several commercials. Among other products, she advertised bouillon cubes for the Swiss company *Maggi* or a series of *Nestlé* products, most importantly the instant coffee brand *Nescafé* for which she also appeared in the television show REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE (1971).

In line with Mexican Formula Pictures, Velasco's character *La India María* appeared across different media ranging from theater to television and film, all of them comedies. Sometimes the films were enriched with elements of other genres such as horror or action.

Producing *La India María*

Similarly to Mexican Formula Pictures, the *India María* films are the result of a certain production mode. In chapter 'Production in the fast lane', I have outlined the context, budgets, and productions practices for Mexican Formula Pictures. On the following pages, I wish to situate the films and television shows of *La India María* within the realm of Mexican Formula Picture production.

Generally, Velasco's work can be divided into different production phases. Initially, the company *Diana Films* produced her feature films. After finishing EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA in 1982, Velasco turned her back on the company and subsequently collaborated with new producers in an attempt to gain more control over her work. All along — even though at times with long lapses in-between projects — she also worked for the company *Televisa*. Ultimately, Velasco founded her own production company *Vlady Films*.

Diana Films S.A.

When Velasco first collaborated with the producer *Diana Films S.A.*, the company was already well established. Since the late 1940s, it had produced a myriad of box office grossers. The owner of the company, Fernando de Fuentes, commonly hired directors and actors he had previously worked with. Among them were Gilberto Martínez Solares[52] who directed various films with the renowned comedian *Tin Tan* (Germán Valdes).[53] *Diana Films* frequently employed another director, Fernando Cortés. Both, Cortés and Martínez Solares also directed several films with *La India María*. Cortés initially brought the character to the big screen and was in charge of her first seven features; Martínez Solares came into the picture at a later point, when Velasco gradually wished to have more control over her character. Martínez Solares and Velasco co-

[52] Martínez Solares also worked for the company *Agrasánchez*, another prolific producer of Mexican Formula Pictures introduced previously.

[53] Valdes mostly impersonated the stereotype of a Mexican American who drew attention through his attire and his use of slang words.

directed OKEY, MISTER PANCHO in 1981 and EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA in 1982, for which she also worked on the script (Ricalde Castro 2004a: 202).

Between 1971 and 1982, *Diana Films* produced 10 of a 16 *India María* features, namely; TONTA, TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1971), EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO (1973), POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! (1973), LA MADRECITA (1974), DURO PERO SEGURO (1975), LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975), LA COMADRITA (1978), SOR TEQUILA (1980), OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) and EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (1982). Budgets for these films were considerably low, ranging from of $65,000 for DURO PERO SEGURO (1975) to of $241,000 for OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981), with average costs around $110,000.[54] When comparing these figures to average production budgets of the time, it stands out that the *La India María* films were considerably cheaper than the average of privately produced features costing around $120,000 in the 1970s. By the late 1970s, average production budgets in the private sector climbed to $190,000 and throughout the 1980s Mexican feature were produced for approximately $200,000.

However, *Diana Films* made more expensive films than other low-budget entrepreneurs such as Agrasánchez, which produced their features for an average as low as $80,000. Notably the productions OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) and SOR TEQUILA (1980) stand out with their high budgets of $241,000 and $226,800 respectively. Reasons for these high figures primarily lay in the nature of these productions; both containing scenes requiring expensive props such as a helicopter or an airplane. For previous productions as for instance LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975) however, even minor expenses such as karate and bullfighting lessons for the actress were justified in the production folder (Rosas 1974). For SOR TEQUILA (1980), money seemed to be less of an issue because the Spanish co-producer *Estudios Balcazar* covered extra expenses. For OKEY, MISTER

[54] I was generously given access to production cost figures for all features produced by *Diana Films* (ranging from budgets to shooting schedules, and correspondence letters). In the original documents all costs are indicated in old Mexican pesos. For clarity, I have calculated the equivalent value in U.S. dollars based on the historic exchange rate provided by the Global Financial Data database (www.globalfinancialdata.com).
TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1972): 1,117,750 Mexican pesos ($94,200)
EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO (1973): 1,197,760 Mexican pesos ($95,825)
POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! (1973): 1,199,000 Mexican pesos ($95,920)
LA MADRECITA (1974): 1,219,650 Mexican pesos ($97,572)
DURO PERO SEGURO (1975): 1,498,039 Mexican pesos ($65,703)
LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975): 1,074,099 Mexican pesos ($85,927)
LA COMADRITA (1978): 1,925,300 Mexican pesos ($84'442)
SOR TEQUILA (1980): 5,374,898 Mexican pesos ($226,789)
OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981): 6,027,899 Mexican pesos ($241'112)
EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (1982): 8,051,00 Mexican pesos (around $ 80,000 depending on the time of the year transactions were made; extremely high inflation rates make it almost impossible to calculate a dollar value).

PANCHO (1981), mainly U.S. distributor, who recognized the film's potential with Latino audiences in the United States, gave higher distribution guarantees.

Additionally, political circumstances favored higher production budgets. Under president José López Portillo (1976–1982), private productions and co-productions with Spain were actively encouraged to produce films (Arnaud 1979). *Diana Films* primarily employed workers from the union *Sindicato de trabajadores de la industria cinematográfica* (STIC). The STIC was mainly composed of below-the-line technicians and was historically relegated to less prestigious tasks. Their salaries were considerably lower than those of members of the *Sindicato de trabajadores de la producción cinematográfica* (STPC).[55] Collaborating with the STIC was one way to keep production costs low. Additionally, shooting times were held to a minimum, never exceeding four weeks. Consequently, filming had to be efficient and there was no time for rehearsals or retakes. This particularly bothered Velasco who wished to have more time to work on her character (Rohrer 2008).

Ill. 30: People gather at the filming of one of the *India María* films.

[55] See also page 27, where I sketch out the role played by the two unions in Mexican Formula Pictures.

Ill. 31: Velasco and a crew member on the set of EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO (1973)

Velasco's Family Business

When Velasco was still under contract at *Diana Films*, she gradually began to impose demands such as having more influence on the script and the development of her character. To this date, she has kept a low profile when it comes to explaining why she halted her collaboration with *Diana Films*. For the record, she has repeatedly underlined her wish to have more control over her work (Rohrer 2008; Zuñiga Barba 1989).

In 1982, Velasco made the transition from working as an actress to directing and later producing her own films by collaborating with family members, none of them previously established in the show business. From that point onward, her two children Ivette Lipkies and Iván Lipkies wrote scripts, produced, and co-directed her films. Contrary to many producers of Mexican Formula Pictures, Velasco did not come from a family that previously worked in the film industry.[56] When she finally left *Diana Films*, she looked for a well-established producer who would grant her additional freedom. She chose *Producciones Matouk,* with whom she produced EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983) and NI CHANA, NI JUANA (1985). For both features, her son Iván was the executive producer, her daughter Ivette worked on the script, and Velasco launched her career as a solo director.

[56] Velasco was born into a middle class family from Puebla on December 17th, 1940. Her mother stayed at home with the four kids, her father worked for the railroad.

Ill. 32: In the course of her career Velasco started writing scripts, direct and even produce her own films.

However, after two productions Velasco left *Producciones Matouk* and founded her own company *Vlady Picture* for which her son Iván Lipkies continued to work as an executive producer, while she and her daughter focused on writing scripts. Their first output was NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (1988) — one of Mexico's biggest box office grossers. Analogous to many Mexican Formula Picture productions, the film was co-financed by the privately owned *Televicine* (*Televisa's* feature film branch). Only LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (1999) was entirely financed by Velasco's company. For the latter, her daughter was in charge of production, her son directed the film, and Velasco wrote the script and starred in the leading role.

For Velasco working as a family brought about several advantages: It was a way to keep costs low and provided increased flexibility in the production process. At the same time, she was able to continuously extend shooting times. As a result, EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983) was shot in five weeks, NI CHANA, NI JUANA (1985) in approximately seven (Fernández Escareño 1996: 122; Ramírez 1984). In addition to her children, Velasco recruited well known and experienced workers from the industry for her projects, among them the comedians *Resortes* and *Piporro*. By combining big names with experienced workers and family members, Velasco smartly lined-up her productions: she guaranteed professionalism without having to make too many compromises.

Ill. 33: Since the mid-1980s Velasco produces her films with her two children, during filming they often argue, here Velasco and her son disagree on the set of LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA in May 2011.

Unfortunately, only limited data is available on budgets and other production aspects for all films produced after Velasco left *Diana Films*. After Matouk's death, company material disappeared or was destroyed. *Vlady Pictures* did not file their material systematically because they didn't think that the information could be of interest. Due to the lack of data, I can only make assumptions based on information given to me by Velasco and her children, along with a couple of articles published in the Mexican press on production processes. According to Velasco, budgets were low compared to the industry average (Rohrer 2008). In two articles published in January 1987, it is noted that production costs for NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ rose to 160 millions of Mexican Pesos (approximately $170'000) — a rather low amount compared to average production budgets (anonymous 1987c; Vieyra 1987). Despite the low cost, production processes seem to have been more complex than for other Mexican Formula Productions: Velasco indicated that she worked on NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ for over a year. The actual shooting spanned over five weeks (Vieyra 1987). In an article on the production process, she commented on her new role as a producer:

> Otro punto que dice tener a su favor son las posibilidades económicas que la da su productora para filmar, como sucedió en "Ni de aquí, ni de allá" que tiene escenas de un aeropuerto estadunidense, así como de un 'freeway' (eje vial, pero bien hecho). "Esas locaciones salen en un ojo de la cara: permisos, sindicatos, seguros, !uff!… Entiendo que la función del productor es sacar mayor provecho al menor costo, pero le hice ver que aunque

> obtuviera menos ganancias, una buena producción da prestigio para esta y las películas que vengan" (Pacheco 1988).
>
> Another point in her favor is the economic framework provided by her production company to make films, similar to NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ, which contains scenes at a U.S. airport as well as on the freeway (like large Mexican roads, but well constructed). "These locations require permits, the collaboration with unions, insurances, whew! I understand that producers should keep production costs low, but I am convinced that a solid production helps to gain prestige for the actual and future films, even if smaller profits are made" (Pacheco 1988).

After launching her career as a director and producer, Velasco gradually began speaking out against drawbacks in the Mexican film industry. For instance, she repeatedly deplored the lack of new and innovative scripts devoid of dirty jokes (De La Cruz Polanco 2002; Jiménez 2002; Valencia 1992; Zuñiga Barba 1989). She also pointed out and condemned the practice of recycling scripts or the insertion of material from previous films — a common production practice to fill running time (Rohrer 2009b). On the other hand, Velasco and her children have eschewed to talk about their collaboration with unions; only once she reluctantly addressed the issue mentioning they caused her many annoyances (Rohrer 2009b). In the credits of EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983), NI CHANA, NI JUANA (1985), SE EQUIVOCÓ LA CIGÜEÑA (1993), and the latest film LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA (2012) the union *Sindicato de trabajadores de la industria cinematográfica* (STIC) appears. For the other features produced by *Vlady Pictures,* the credits and articles don't allow association with any union.

Over time, Velasco also revised her assumption that working as a family would facilitate the production process. In 2004 and later on the set of her latest film LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA, she talked about the annoyances of working as a family enterprise. Times and times again, she got into fights with her children. In an interview published in the press, Velasco and her son Iván disclose that they often get on each other's nerves and admit having arguments on the set. Velasco also stressed that sometimes she had to put her son in place due to his lack of experience (Huerta 2004). I was able to witness similar scenes in 2011 when visiting the set during the shooting of the latest *India María* film, LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA, for which Velasco worked with her son who directed the film, while her daughter was in charge of production.

Ill. 34: In all *India María* productions, measures were taken to cut cost. During the shoot of LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA Lipkies' and Velasco's car were wrecked for an action scene, simply to save money.

Television Producing *La India María*

As outlined, *La India María* became widely known through her appearances on the show SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO, which aired on the privately owned *Canal de las Estrellas* (one of *Televisa's* channels). The company's interest to include her character in one of its programs is not surprising: Similar to other television characters such as the childish *El Chavo del Ocho* or the antihero *El Chapulín Colorado, La India María* perfectly fit into *Televisa's* profile of an apparently innocent entertaining character type. Also, *La India María*, disguised by her comic routines, did not seem to posses any potential for social criticism, a censorship requirement monitored for both state and private channels (Ricalde Castro 2004a: 204).

After Velasco debuted on the big screen and no longer appeared on SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO, *Televisa's* influence on *La India María* gradually ceased. It was only in 1987 that she returned to the company, this time to the branch *Televicine* for the production of her third feature NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ. This was around the time when *Televicine* was becoming an increasingly important producer of Mexican Formula Pictures. *Televicine* also distributed her features across Mexico and the United States on the big and the small screen. Velasco's relationship to her former employer at *Diana Films*, Fernando Fuentes, who was at the time head at *Televicine,* might have facilitated the collaboration between her company *Vlady Pictures* and *Televicine.* Teaming up seemed

to work for both Velasco and *Televicine*, which also financed the next film produced and directed by Velasco, SE EQUIVOCÓ LA CIGÜEÑA (1993). For LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (beginning of filming in 1996), *Televicine* was apparently no longer interested in collaborating (Chiquet 1996; A. S. Hernández 1996). Nevertheless, Velasco returned to *Televisa* in 1998, for her comical routine program ¡AY MARÍA QUÉ PUNTERÍA! and sporadically appeared in other shows. Despite her long lasting collaboration, she underlined her independence at various occasions. She particularly pointed out that she was never an exclusive artist of *Televisa*, and that no other television station had ever offered her a contract (Morales Valentín 2002; Olvera 1996). Nonetheless, to this date, the actress is often mentioned in connection with *Televisa.*[57]

As shown, numerous parallels exist between the production practices of Mexican Formula Pictures and the features and series with and by Velasco. They were produced with low budgets compared to average production costs for commercial films. Costs were kept to a minimum by contracting cheap labor, keeping shooting times to a minimum, and working as a family. Although, budgets are low for the *India María* films, they exceed the average cost of the Agrasánchez — a prolific producer of Mexican Formula Pictures — by approximately $30,000. Further stands out that Velasco's success is closely linked to *Televisa,* which gradually became involved in the production of Mexican Formula Pictures. Despite parallels, I wish to point out various differences as well as Velasco's singularity. Contrary to many Mexican Formula producers, Velasco never made features that went straight-to-video. In particular, when she began to influence production procedures, she insisted on her commitment and love for the movie theater, her favorite exhibition space (R. Galindo 1990). For Velasco, video was simply a lucrative exhibition form — a distribution channel that followed exploitation at theaters (R. Galindo 1990). Also, she never relocated her business headquarters to the United States, nor did she act in a film produced in a cross border context. Nevertheless, many scenes for OKEY, MISTER PANCHO and NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ were shot in Houston and Los Angeles. Most of all, Velasco was one of the few women within Mexico's film industry, working in front and behind the camera. No other female director or producer has reached a similar productivity and popularity with a wide audience.

Circulation: Television, Theaters, and other Exhibition Forms

The features and television shows with *La India María* have been distributed and exhibited much in the same way as other Mexican Formula Pictures. In the 1970s, her features were screened at movie theaters in Mexico, the United States, and across Latin America. Many of them were re-released several times. Later on, they were aired on television, distributed on VHS and DVD, and circulated as pirated copies. As of today,

[57] The association might, among other reasons, have led to the perception among left-oriented intellectuals of her being yet another character type exploited by the conglomerate.

many of her films can be found online, be purchased on DVD, and they are still aired on television.

The features starring *La India María* were mostly distributed by *Películas Nacionales* within Mexico. In the United States, *Colombia Pictures'* Spanish language distribution branch instantly recognized the potential of these films and distributed almost all of them across the territory, predominantly in cities with large Latino populations such as San Antonio in Texas or Los Angeles in California.[58] Across Latin America, *Películas Mexicana* negotiated terms and conditions, also organizing the shipping of prints and press booklets.

With the increasingly wide proliferation of videos, *Videocine* — one of *Televisa's* distribution branches — bought the rights to distribute all *India María* films in the video home market in Mexico as well as in the United States. In the meantime, the rights have been vested to the company *Laguna Films* — currently the video distributor of most Mexican Formula Pictures for various territories, among them, the United States and most Latin American countries.

Although movie attendance constantly decreased throughout the 1970s and in particular during the 1980s, films starring the *India María* character guaranteed large audiences. Her films invariably reached high rankings in the box office statistics published in the industry journal *Camara* as well as in the press.[59] Some of them remained at the top for several months or even longer (Camara 1982). The large number of copies sent to exhibitor also point to the high demand. OKEY, MISTER PANCHO, for example, premiered with 19 copies in Mexico City in 1981 (Ugalde Romero 1982b: 11).[60] In California, the film premiered with almost 30 copies. Revenues for the first week added up to $19,000 in California alone. Only slightly lower returns were measured in the 7 following weeks (Diana Films 1981). In San Antonio and Houston, OKEY, MISTER PANCHO was screened in 15 theaters (Diana Films 1981). 60 copies of LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER were even distributed across the Mexican territory in 1999 (Ramírez Hernández 1998). Lastly, reports and letters from distributors across Latin America attest to the successes of the *India María* films. The first feature starring Velasco as *La India María* TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO already resonated positively across Latin America. On May 7th, 1973, the international distributor *Películas Mexicanas*, represented by Ignacio Pendás, made this statement about the box office performance of TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO in Caracas, Venezuela:

[58] As an exception SOR TEQUILA was distributed by Clasa-Mohme.

[59] Articles mentioning her box office success: (anonymous 1985b; Camargo 1993).

[60] Ugalde Romero observed the gradual increase in copies and even speaks of a new trend assuring producers of recouping their investments over a shorter time period (Ugalde Romero 1982b: 11). I propose that the increasingly unstable economic situation led to the aforementioned exhibition practice. Producers simply tried to assure revenues before the Mexican peso was significantly lower in value.

> La película ha respondido extraordinariamente bien, aparte de que el sábado sufrimos un verdadero temporal de agua, que perjudico grandemente las entradas (Pendás 1973).
>
> The film has reached an extraordinary box office response despite heavy rains on Saturday, which negatively affected attendance (Pendás 1973).

The addressor also adds a possible explanation for the success:

> El éxito alcanzado se debe a la presentación que hicimos en televisión de *La India María*… el público la ha recibido con grandes muestras de cariño y simpatía (Pendás 1973).
>
> The accomplished success is mainly the result of the presentation we made of *La India María* on television… the public has embraced her with benevolence and sympathy (Pendás 1973).

Distributors and cinema owners across North and South America also responded with enthusiasm to the success of her subsequent films. For POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! The Los Angeles exhibitor transmitted the revenue numbers to the producer *Diana Films* and commented: "as you know these grosses are very good. Congratulations!" (Dunlap 1974). I refrain from summing up box office results for each of her films. However, I wish to sketch out the trajectory of one of her features, namely NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ. The film treats of illegal immigration to the United States — a topic that has concerned and affected many Mexicans and Latinos on both sides of the border. More precisely, in the mid 1980s, it became increasingly difficult to cross into the United States due to stricter migration laws, in particular after the passing of the Simpson-Rodino law in 1986. Concurrently, Latinos gradually became one of the largest migrant groups. By the 1980s, about 4 million Latinos lived in Los Angeles alone (Camara 1984d: 5). As previously mentioned, in the United States, theater admissions were higher than in Mexico, which resulted in higher revenues from films shown in the United States. As a consequence, many Formula Pictures were first released in the United States before they premiered in their home market. This was also the case for NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ, first launched in theaters in the United States in 1987. Four months later, it came out in Mexico City (Fernández Escareño 1996: 123). Besides the higher spending capacity of Latinos in the United States, another reason might have led to this release schedule. In an article in *El Nacional* a journalist suspected that NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ was being withheld from distribution in Mexico because preference was given to American films. After its premiere, NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ became an instant hit in the United States and in Mexico where it soon was among the country's most successful films of the decade. Not only did the film outnumber Mexican sexy movies, widely watched at the time, it also attracted more spectators than RAMBO III (Peter McDonald, US, 1988) (García Riera 1998: 344; García Tsao 1990; Ricalde Castro 2004a: 197). This result is rather astonishing for the time period, during which successful Mexican films commonly attracted about half as many moviegoers as American productions (Medina De La Serna 1988: 9). Overall, NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ remained in theaters for over 6 months — an extremely long duration compared to simultaneously released Mexican features, which stayed in theaters for a maximum of 8 weeks (Fernández Escareño 1996: 123; Medina

De La Serna 1988: 9). The remarkable appeal of the film was also taken up in various articles. The Mexican newspaper *Novedades*, for instance, titled "*Millones de cine espectadores se identifican con La India María*" (Millions of spectators identify themselves with *La India María*) (Velez 1989). This headline grasps the popularity of the character as well as of the film and points to moviegoers who, as suggested, 'identify' with the character. *La India María* remained the "*reina de la taquilla*" (the box office queen) — as she was often called — from 1988 to 1993 (El Soberbio 1989; Notimex 1997; Segoviano 1994; Tetzpa Zayaz 1987). Each year, Velasco was attributed the prize for being Mexico's strongest box-office grosser actress.[61] Preceding her success with NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ, she was awarded a prize sponsored by the Mexican Newspaper *El Heraldo* for her career defending an innocent form of humor (anonymous 1989b; El Soberbio 1989; V. H. Sánchez 1989b).[62]

Available box office figures, the numbers of copies circulating, and the attributed 'popularity' awards stand for *La India María*'s extraordinary success with the audience. The Mexican film industry, on the other hand, deprived Velasco of any critical approval. Neither the character *La India María* nor director and producer Velasco ever received a prize for her professional skills. It was only in 2004 that Mexican industry professionals finally decided to acknowledge her by attributing her an Ariel (Mexican Film Prize – counterpart to the Oscars in Hollywood) for best adapted screenplay for the film HUAPANGO (MX, 2004), a Shakespeare adaptation directed by her son Iván, in which she plays the part of a dance teacher. This is the only film in which she plays a lead role, not as the *India María* character.

Due to her success at the box office, Velasco's films were among the more expensive Mexican Formula Pictures on the distribution market. The exhibitor of a theater targeting Latinos in San Diego commented: "*Las más caras son las de Mario Moreno y las de La India María*" (The most expensive ones are those by Mario Moreno (one of the Almada brothers) and the ones by *La India María*) (Iglesias 1991: 106). Many exhibitors in Mexico, the United States, and across Latin America were nevertheless willing to pay the extra price, knowing that the *India María* films would fill up their venues. Additionally, they often booked performances by the actress who regularly accompanied her films and staged comical sketches before screenings. Despite the higher costs for exhibitors, the *India María* films were mostly shown in venues targeting working class audiences, the so-called *cines de segunda* (second-class theaters).[63] As previously outlined, these locales offered little comfort, but they also

[61] In 1994, she had to share the award with the actors of LA RISA EN VACACIONES / VACATION LAUGHS (René Cardona Jr., MX) for the first time (anonymous 1995: 3).

[62] When taking a closer look at prizes awarded by *El Heraldo*, it stands out that most of them were attributed to *Televisa* actors. To this date, I have not detected the link between the two companies.

[63] *Diana Films* has provided me with a list of theaters in which the films were screened or where the actress performed.

served as gathering places. Due to the common practice of double billing, her features were often programmed with another Mexican Formula Picture. As she was said to never fail to attract customers, her films were often screened first, as the main attraction (Rohrer 2010a, 2010b). In the United States, her films were exclusively screened in theaters aimed at Latino audiences, mostly in renovated downtown theaters or at drive-ins in more rural areas. None of her films were subtitled or dubbed in English.

Contrary to many Mexican Formula Pictures, the *India María* films were seldom withheld from distribution for long or waited for an exhibition slot (*enlatamiento*[64]). Under the producer Fernando de Fuentes (*Diana Films*), the films starring Velasco were without exception released instantly after they were finished. Likely, this is due to De Fuentes relations to key players in the film business. According to his secretary Nydia Herrera, he knew everyone and pulled the right strings whenever necessary.[65] *Enlatamiento* became an increasing problem when Velasco left *Diana Films*. As described, NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ was released in Mexico later than it was probably planned. Longer was the delay for LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER, shot in 1996, but not released until January 1999. In an article in the Mexican newspaper *Novedades,* Velasco gave voice to her frustration and even criticized the public for its disinterest in Mexican fare over Hollywood blockbusters (anonymous 1997a). Despite the common belief at the time that the public was responsible for the lack of Mexican films in the exhibition circuit, moviegoers had in fact a limited influence. More likely, interests between the Mexican industry and American distributors conflicted and led to the aforementioned *enlatamiento* of Mexican films.

As illustrated for the Mexican Formula Pictures, films were often re-released in Mexico's rural areas and in theaters aiming at the working populace, to satisfy the higher demand for national fare. The *India María* features have probably been among the favorites for theatrical re-runs because they guaranteed revenues at the box office. DURO PERO SEGURO (1975) — the fourth feature starring Velasco as *La India María* — was, for instance, successfully re-released during the production process of NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (Vieyra 1987). A journalist commented on the successful re-run: *"...Esto significa que sus películas [las de La India María], como las de Cantinflas pueden exhibirse con igual exito en cualquier época"* (…This means that her films [*India María*'s] — like *Cantinflas'* features — can be successfully exhibited anytime) (anonymous 1987c). Also, other films were re-released at various moments. Three years after its premiere in 1985, NI CHANA, NI JUANA returned to Mexican screens with 20

[64] See also page 55.

[65] Nydia Herrera continues to work for *Diana Films* to this date. She has provided lots of interesting information on business practices of the company and the industry in general. She has been an extremely valuable source of information.

copies, grossing approximately $12,000 (31 million Mexican pesos) on the first night of its re-run (Fernández Escareño 1996: 122).[66]

La India María was not only among the big screen favorites, her features also widely proliferated on the small screen, in Mexico as well as across the United States and Latin America. For a survey on Mexican audiences, television scholar Sánchez Ruíz interviewed customers of video rental stores in Guadalajara. To the question of what film they remembered having rented recently, "*Las de La India María*" (the ones by *La India María*) was among the most frequent answers (Sánchez Ruiz 1993: 257). The spontaneous mentions clearly attest to the character's popularity among customers of video rental stores. Interestingly, the interviewees didn't name specific titles, but summarized the films under the character's name, which over the years had become a franchise. Similarly, in Latino communities in the United States the *India María* films were also among the most rented in video stores (Arbelaez 2001: 642; Barrios 1989). By the late 1980s, the press — here the newspaper *Ovaciones* — accounted for her success on the video market, titling one of its articles "*La India María también es campeona en el video*" (*La India María* is also a champion on video) (Galeana 1988).

To conclude on circulation, I wish to make some remarks on television, the exhibition form *La India María* originally became known through. The innocent nature of her character, along with the low production values of her features and television series, perfectly corresponded to the television aesthetics of the time. Television viewers already were used to and fond of the cheaply made *telenovelas* and they literally embraced the *India María* features and television programs. To this date, Velasco's Formula Pictures continue to be broadcasted on television, predominantly on channels owned by the corporation *Televisa.* Commonly, the films are aired on Sunday afternoon, targeting families in Mexico and the United States. Existing rating statistics and the continuous programming of her films affirm their ongoing popularity with the television audience. As outlined, *India María* features were usually first released at theaters and were subsequently distributed on VHS, DVD, and aired on television. In 1993, however, *Televisa* decided to premiere the film SE EQUIVOCÓ LA CIGÜEÑA on its new cable channel *Cinestrenar* (part of *Cablevisión*) for its inauguration, one week prior to the film's premiere at theaters (Ayala Blanco 1994: 415). The chosen strategy might have been a means to convince a wider television audience to subscribe to cable television and promote the new channel. Or *Televisa* might have decided to launch the film on television first, because movie theater attendance was already low in the year the film was released.

Advertising

India María films were advertised in the same way as other Mexican Formula Pictures. To begin with, the same channels were used to market the films, namely: print press,

[66] Articles announcing or commenting the re-runs: (anonymous 1987a; Barriga Chavez 1991).

radio, television, movie theaters, and exhibition venues. Advertising for the features with *La India María* primarily centered on the character, which was already known from television. Sometimes, distributors simply reminded the target group of how hilarious *La India María* was when launching a new feature. Additionally, well-known Mexican actors and actresses such as *Resortes* were cast. To attract even more spectators across Latin America and within the Latino community in the United States, actors from Venezuela, Columbia, Argentina, or Puerto Rico were hired (Vergara 1972). For example, in LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL, the Puerto Rican Rolando Borral, already famous through his appearances in *telenovelas*, played a lead role.

Besides big names, advertising largely depended on graphic depictions. For each *India María* movie, posters were designed and hung across towns (see page 82). Exhibitors also used lobby cards with stills to market the films. For both, the posters and the lobby cards, the character is graphically enhanced. Often, allusions are made to the main conflict in the story. On a lobby card for SOR TEQUILA for example, *La India María* is depicted as a cartoon nun (Ill. 35). In the scene, she pulls a priest from a helicopter and together they are about to fall. Their gestures and expressions are, contrary to what might be expected, filled with joy und excitement. The priest throws his arms happily in the air, while *María* elegantly swings her legs imitating an acrobatic attitude. The still from the same film, integrated on the poster, shows *La India María* arm-wrestling with a topless muscleman with a shiny upper body. While he is evidently suffering, she seems almost relaxed.

Ill. 35: The lobby cards used to advertise *India María* films, here SOR TEQUILA, always contained a still, and a graphically depicted scene.

Ill. 36: Cartoon drawings were used to advertise *India María* films in newspaper, here one example of EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO.

Advertisements were also placed in the events section of newspapers. For the *India María* features, cartoon drawings were frequently used (Ill. 36). Some of them depict a single scene; others illustrate a series of comical moments from the film. The images commonly stress certain body parts such as her large mouth, long braids, or stocky body. Some advertisements also explicitly address their audience. For OKEY, MISTER PANCHO the phrase: "*NINOS traigan a toda la familia*!" (Kids, bring along your entire family!) written in bold white letters enhanced the black square box. For EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO spectators were warned about the strong emotions the film might evoke:

!Se le pondrá la carne de gallina! Los pelos de punta! Le baillaran las rodillas! Le rechinaran los dientes! Se le saldrán los ojos! Se comer alas uñas! (Excerpt from an advertisement for EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO).

You will get goose bumps! Your hair will split! Your knees will tremble! Your fingers will snap! Your eyes will fall out! You will eat your fingernails! (Excerpt from an advertisement for EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO).

Besides advertisements in the print press, films featuring *La India María* were promoted on the radio targeting illiterates or people for whom reading the newspaper did not form part of their media consumption habits. The distribution company commonly provided numerous catch lines for each features as well as a more extensive radio advertisement to be read out by a radio moderator. One announcement for LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL sounded as follows:

"La Presidenta Municipal le quita al pobre para darselo al rico…" (The mayor takes from the poor to give to the rich…)

This catch line claims that *La India María* takes from the poor, when in fact it's the opposite in the story. Clearly, the line attempts to draw attention by making a statement that is will naturally raise questions.

The radio commercial for LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL was longer and went as follows:

La India María como 'PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL'??? Increíble!… Inaudtio!… Sí?… Pués véala en PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL para que coce viéndola como resuelve el problema de los braceros …importando gringos a Mexico!… Como combate los altos precios de las tortillas… el pan y los frijoles quitándolos como artículos de lujo! *La India María*, María Elena Velasco en LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL toda a colores una película divertidísima para toda la família con un reparto formidable encabezado por El Resortes, Pancho Cordova, Fernando Soto Mantequilla, Borolas y muchos más… No se la pierda… (Press Book for LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL).[67]

La India María as 'Mayor'??? Incredible!… Unheard of !… Yes?… Well come and see her in PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL and enjoy watching how she solves problems with migrant workers … by importing white Americans to Mexico! How she fights the high price of *tortillas*, … bread, and beans by declaring them luxury items! *La India María*, María Elena Velasco in LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL in color, a funny film for the whole family with a great cast headed by Resortes, Pancho Cordova, Fernando Soto Mantequilla, Borolas and many more … Don't miss it… (Press Book for LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL).

Wording and sentence structure used in the above advertisement clearly allude to an oral form of expression and stress pleasures the films promises to evoke. Just as the catch lines, the plot is advertised as containing surprising actions by the character.

The play with proverbs is yet another way to advertise the films. Sometimes, the sayings are challenging to decode for someone who is not from a Mexican background. For the film LA COMADRITA the following phrase was used:

El compadre pone… dios dispone… viene la comadrita y los descompone!

[67] The numerous spelling errors in the publicity texts are eye-catching.

Literally translated this means: The godfather puts it, God decides, and La comadrita (the godmother, term used for a nice friend, here for *La India María*) turns it all upside down. Although the meaning is roughly the same in English, the Spanish version rhymes and is catchy. Lastly, publicity spots composed of a series of comical routines were produced and shipped to theatrical exhibitors and television.

It could be argued that Velasco's live performances and her recordings formed part of an advertising strategy employed for her films. Despite the fact that these activities helped to promote her films, I prefer to consider them as autonomous popular formats and not simply reduce them to paratexts with a secondary role. Finally, I wish to point to a certain discrepancy in the depiction of the character in the advertising materials as opposed to the films. For some posters, *La India María* is solely depicted as a hero, whereas in the movies her character oscillates between loser and hero. In Part II of this dissertation, I will explore more thoroughly the key role paratexts play in the process of reception for the *India María* films.

Velasco's Political Ties and Censorship

Before concluding this chapter, I wish to address Velasco's political stance and aspects of censorship. As shown, the Mexican film industry has always been inextricably linked to state policies, regulations, and their respective implementation. Practices largely depended on the person in charge and often they varied from one presidential term to the next. The films featuring *La India María* were predominantly produced during the presidencies of Luis Echeverría (1970–1976), José Lopez Portillo (1976–1982), and Miguel De La Madrid (1982–1988). Only two films were made when Carlos Salinas de Gortari was in office (1988–1994). Velasco, like the majority of professionals in the Mexican film industry, was to some extent intertwined with Mexican politics.

Velasco's on-screen acting career was launched during Echeverría's presidential term. *Diana Films* — the company that produced her films — was one of the few private companies that continued to make films targeting a wide audience during this time. This is rather surprising, as Echeverría excoriated the majority of private productions for their lack of artistic quality or condemned them for their purely commercial interest and their themes. Over the years, he gradually nationalized the Mexican film industry and overtly discouraged private productions. While many private producers left the country or even withdrew from film production, the company *Diana Films* managed to continuously produce films. However, Echeverría's reforms left their traces: Due to the lack of support by the government, *Diana Films* gradually invested less money per film. Between 1970 and 1976, production costs dropped from around $95,000 (TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO) to $65'000 (DURO PERO SEGURO). Significantly, the company exclusively launched projects that assured large revenues. Towards the end of Echeverría's term, *Diana Films* actively encouraged the election of a new regime, which promised to facilitate private production. To demonstrate her commitment,

Velasco even recorded a song for Portillo's presidential campaign (anonymous 1987b). However, when Portillo was finally elected president in 1976, Fernando Fuentes, the head of *Diana Films*, initially continued to be extremely cautious. In a letter to the Spanish co-producer who signaled interest to co-produce SOR TEQUILA and who was in favor of launching other projects, he wrote:

> De momento, estimo que convendría dejar este proyecto para más adelante, hasta en tanto se normalice la producción independiente de México o sea hasta ver que explotación comercial y que lineamientos de crédito y de producción tendrán nuestras películas frente al nuevo gobierno, que aunque ha pregonado en varias ocasiones que requiere de la producción cinematográfica privada, no ha dado ningún pasa para alentarla en ningún sentido. Creo pues que concretar en este momento una película que no sea las que tienen ya la mitad del camino andado (como es el caso de *La India María*, *Capulina*, *Piporro*) resultaría muy aventurado (excerpt from letter by producers Fernando Fuentes, March, 16th 1977).
>
> For now, I propose to leave this [new] project, until circumstances for independent productions are back to normal again or until we can estimate the degree of commercial exploitation and guidelines regarding credits under the new government which has signaled its support for private production, but to this date has not done anything to actually advance its strategy. Therefore, I believe it is too risky to push a project that is not already partly lined-up (as it is the case of *La India María*, *Capulina*, *Piporro*) (Excerpt from letter by producers Fernando Fuentes, March 16th, 1977).

Despite the initial skepticism of Fuentes, productions costs rose again. In 1979, *Diana Films* began shooting OKEY, MISTER PANCHO with a budget of around $240,000. In fact, the presidential terms of Portillo and De La Madrid proved to be fruitful for the private-sector productions.

Little is known about Velasco's involvement in politics when she began producing her own films. Initially, she refused to make any kind of political statement. However, by the time LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER premiered in theaters in 1999, she repeatedly called out for female politicians in key positions. To this date, one can only speculate whether the launch of LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER in Mexican theaters in the midst of Vicente Fox's presidential campaign was coincidental or planned. As a matter of fact, the film triggered many articles on gender issues and politics.

Besides entanglements between the film industry and politicians, censorship regulations and practices determined what was brought to the Mexican screens. This also holds true for Velasco's films or the ones she appeared in. Before the start of each shoot, all scripts had to be authorized by a censorship board. An official report was formulated for every project, consisting of a summary of the plot, comments on cast and crew as well as critical considerations. In the latter, concerns and objections were listed and depending on their severity, shoots were authorized or vetoed. Generally, the *India María* features had no or little difficulty being accepted. Mostly, their content was categorized as harmless or purely to entertain — often foregrounding the profit-making aspect and missing explicit political or sexual allusions. Their potential for disturbance was considered to be minimal. In the report for LA COMADRITA written on August 4th, 1975,

it is merely mentioned that the film contained some illogical dialog lines such as "*somos de izquierda moderada*" (we are from the center-left party). However, these lines did not further bother the censorship board, particularly because — according to them — the film's goal was to provoke easy laughs with a gullible audience (Borja 1975: 6). Considerably longer are the critical remarks for the film OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981). Comments are structured into "sex and nakedness", "expression with swearwords or of inappropriate nature", and "violence". Despite numerous examples in each category, the censorship board concludes that all these aspects are of minor relevance; even a marihuana smoking hippie and *La India María* who jokes around in the Mexican embassy did not keep the board from authorizing the shoot (gobernación date not noted). Other films, among them SOR TEQUILA (1980), didn't receive any critical remarks at all (Borja 1976: 4).

For television, yet other regulations and practices applied. After the passing of a governmental law prohibiting content that 'went against good customs', all films became subject to inspections (Nasser 2008: 48). Just as with censorship laws for the cinema, the interpretation of the television regulation largely depended on the person in charge. Additionally, Mexican private television was closely affiliated with powerful industrial groups and the nation's upper class (Sinclair 1999: 38). To what extent the *India María* features and series were subject to censorship on television remains open. To this date, *Televisa* maintains a low profile when it comes to commenting its censorship practices. For that reason, I am left to make assumptions based on sparse information. First, political remarks might have led to Velasco's exclusion from the show SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO (1971). Also, when interviewed in 1998 in respect to her collaboration with *Televisa,* Velasco admitted that she was just barely passing censorship ("*estoy al limite*") (Mendoza de Lira 1998). The *Televisa* producer in charge of her project on the other hand stressed that she had absolute freedom (Mendoza de Lira 1998). I refrain from judging these statements, but simply note that Velasco was halted to take into consideration the company's censorship guidelines and the company's beneficiaries who were mostly closely affiliated with Mexico's conservative party PRI. Finally, *La India María* faced a first intent of censorship under the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000–2006), during which Velasco's character *La India María* was epitomized as the negative depiction of indigenous women (Stevenson 2001).

To conclude this introduction of my main object of research, it can be stated that *La India María* and her films are clearly representative examples of Mexican Formula Pictures — most evident are similarities in industry practices: Velasco has appeared across media, her films are produced with low-budgets and the characteristics in circulation closely resemble the context of Mexican Formula Pictures.

Part II: Reception of *La India María*

As mentioned in the introduction, my interest in Mexican Formula Pictures, and in particular the *India María* films, stems from the lack of previous scholarship concerning them as well as their contradictory reception. Since the 1970s, Mexican critics have vehemently denigrated Mexican Formula Pictures, and even today many critics and intellectuals still strongly disapprove of them. On the other hand, Mexican Formula Pictures have been consumed and enthusiastically embraced by Mexican workers, migrants and Latinos residing in the United States. Mexican Formula Pictures clearly bear what the cultural studies scholar John Fiske calls a sure sign of popular culture: "the combination of widespread consumption with widespread critical disapproval" (Fiske 1995: 106). Like other products of popular culture, Mexican Formula Pictures are deeply contradictory.

To simply reduce the reception of *India María* films and more generally Mexican Formula Pictures to two opposed readings — one affirmative, the other one oppositional — would, however, be a sweeping generalization that fails to do justice to the multifaceted receptions by viewers. For instance, my Chicano friends, who use names of characters from the films as their nicknames in their blogs on websites for the Latino community in the Los Angeles area, have appropriated different meanings than a Mexican taxi driver who calls the *India María* character "*La reina de mi vieja*" (the 'queen' of my wife). His reception, in turn, differs considerably from those of a drag queen who regularly impersonates characters from Mexican Formula Pictures or a street vendor who declares that he simply enjoys watching these films.

In the following part, I will closely examine the *India María* films, the character and persona — actress, director and producer — María Elena Velasco, as she appears across media, live and on screen. All of these facets of her personality and productivity bear characteristics of what cultural studies scholar John Fiske labels "producerly texts" — being extremely polysemic, they give rise to a surprisingly eclectic range and broad spectrum of possible receptions (Fiske 2003: 158).[68] For the empirical part of my

[68] Fiskes definition of a producerly text comprises two tendencies of texts described by French semiologist Barthes as "readerly" (*lisible*) and "writerly" (*scriptible*) (Barthes 1975a). In short, a readerly text is meant for a concept of an essentially passive reader. By contrast, the writerly text challenges the reader to continuously question the text itself and make sense of it. Contrary to writerly texts, producerly texts do not 'make' readers 'strange', but they integrate them through practices of everyday life and provoke manifold types of coping behavior. Producerly texts always tend to be "excessive and obvious"

research, I interviewed 30 people who have watched the *India María* films in Mexico and the United States.[69] The main goal of this study was to inquire, not only into the ways interviewees made sense of *La India María*, but also how they integrated the films into their daily lives. Based on the interviews and their explanations, the analysis of the films and paratexts as well as their contextualization, I could distinguish four predominant reception modes (entertainment, empowerment, diaspora, and critique). Regardless of these distinctions, however, it must not be assumed that a viewer's reception is limited to a single category. Much to the contrary, viewers switch between these seemingly separate modes according to viewers' personal experiences and tendency to foreground each aspect at different moments. Furthermore, my findings challenge initial ideas about reception, which are neither limited to nor contained by established notions of film reception in academia — I was overwhelmed, instead, with a plethora of unexpected possibilities.

For my research, it is thus important to clarify my understanding of spectatorship, which I define in terms of its manifold tensions between 'actual viewers', who are historically and locally determined by viewing practices, race, gender, class and institutions, and theoretical 'spectators'. Along the lines with Shohat and Stam, I argue that media spectatorship forms a trialog between texts, readers and communities existing in discursive and social relationships with one another (Shohat and Stam 1994: 347). Furthermore, spectatorship must always be distinguished according to its various registers (Shohat and Stam 1994: 350):

1. The spectator as fashioned by the text itself (through focalization, point-of-view conventions, narrative structuring, mise-en-scène),
2. The spectator as fashioned by the (diverse and evolving) technical apparatuses (movie theater, domestic VCR, interactive technologies),
3. The spectator as fashioned by the institutional contexts of spectatorship (social ritual of moviegoing, classroom analysis, film archive),
4. The spectator as constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies, and
5. The actual spectator as embodied, having a race and a gender and being historically situated.

Significantly, text, apparatus, discourse and history are all in constant motion, and the analysis of spectatorship must therefore explore the tensions among the levels and the

(Fiske 1995: 114). Both aspects often cause critics to denigrate texts as 'vulgar', 'superficial', 'melodramatic', or 'bad'. These characteristics also tend to counteract the uniqueness of a text, which often leads to their critical devaluation (Fiske 1995: 114, 18, 20).

[69] More precisely, I interviewed people on both sides of the border, in Mexico and the United States. In total, I interviewed 7 taxi drivers (MX), 4 hairdresser (3 US/1 MX), 5 market women (MX), 3 teachers (US), 2 library clerks (US), 4 cleaning personnel (2 US/2 MX), 3 farm workers (US), 2 gardeners (1 MX / 1 US). The interviewees were between 25 and 60 year old, all of them of Mexican descent. These people were recruited through unions, the university, and finally by myself in the streets.

diverse ways that these constitute the spectator, as well as the ways that the spectator shapes that encounter by positioning himself (Shohat and Stam 1994: 350).

Contrary to Shoat and Stam, I refrain from using the term 'reader', because I am convinced that Mexican Formula Pictures have been and still are perceived as media products rather than texts. I therefore choose a terminology, which is more strongly grounded within media reception studies. I speak of 'viewers' — or at times 'users' (investigating appropriations on YouTube) — when referring to people I interviewed for this research, ranging from taxi drivers to women working in street markets, migrant workers who live in the United States, and fans who express their admiration online. When using the term 'audience', I refer to a group of people watching films either in the cinema or in front of the small screen, defined by a historic moment and the community. Most importantly, I distinguish between audiences in the United States and Mexico. The term 'spectator' is always understood in relation to a theory regarding aspects of how he/she is fashioned by a film, for instance. This choice implies that I will use different terms to refer to the process of reception, 'reading' refers to meanings proffered by the filmic texts, 'reception' encompasses all activities of negotiating meaning, whereas 'appropriations', from within cultural studies, lean toward the notion of integrating films into viewers' daily lives and at times even create something new as the result of the reception process.

Before delving into my understanding of reception, and in order to gain a sufficiently ample vantage point on my subject, I separate the *India María* films into three categories determined, in this case, by the story formula. More precisely, I argue that *India María* films: 1) tell the story of an adventurous journey; 2) treat aspects of religion; and 3) deal with society's power structures. Again, these categories serve to distinguish between aspects that co-exist in most films, but are foregrounded in certain films. They allow us to observe how each twist in the story formula, when emphasized, triggers a specific and distinct quality and mode of reception.

Having established this take, I then turn to the question of character ethnicity which, as I argue, triggers two diametrically opposed receptions: one critical — judging the character to be a racist depiction; and the other empowering — appropriating racial stigma by stressing a character's ability to transgress common stereotypes and media depictions of indigenous people. Similarly, the exaggerated depiction of a cliché character in this context suggests opposing and contradictory readings. Not only can the character be deemed as a mere stereotype (critical) or its transgression (empowering), but the rupture from a stereotype can take place on many levels, not limited to its containment in story and characterization, but also occurs off the screen in the larger viewing context and, of course, through the image of the persona conveyed in the press, and by film scholars.

A similar and less polemic binary opposition exists between modes of reception concerning migration (diaspora) and the experience of national identity when displaced. As I will examine later in this section, *India María* films play a crucial role in the construction of complex diasporic identities. More precisely, films function to reflect and revive migration experiences (diaspora). They can even reinforce such experiences if interpreted and applied by viewers as practical instruction for border crossing. At the same time, the films and screening contexts are designed to help viewers remember their homeland and can even stimulate feelings of national pride, a sense of belonging, inclusion and celebration of Mexicanness.

Finally, viewers are also invited to simply watch the films and enjoy them (entertainment), feeling the pleasure in laughing at slapstick performances, in witnessing the transgression of an oppressive stereotype, in glimpsing one's part in a larger common experience, but also, for the critic who is willing to delight in the contradiction between the richness of reception and the apparent poverty and low quality of the films. Before concluding this part, I tackle a more recent phenomenon and outline how the Internet has influenced the reception of *India María* films long after their initial release, and continues to change our understanding of the films today.

The Films of *La India María*: Formulas and Spectacles

India María films, along with other Mexican Formula Pictures, combine the logic of cinema of attractions with those of classical narration.[70] While the plot follows predefined patterns repeated in numerous films, the developing storyline is always interrupted by a sudden display of spectacles often consisting of slapstick gags or musical performances, not only onscreen, but sometimes live and as part of the larger viewing context. These defining attributes and characteristic place *India María* films in the realm producerly texts — highly accessible through their narration and, at the same time, punctuated by obvious and excessive elements. In addition, in almost all *India María* films inter- and trans-textual[71] repetitions of plot are easily identified.

[70] Gunning defines the cinema of attraction by its ability to show. In his view, it is a form of 'exhibitionist' cinema (1986: 64), because it directly addresses spectators and enters into a relationship with them, for instance through the actors' looks at the camera, the displays of bodies (often full nudity), or magic tricks, held together in a rudimentary way through the succession of events (1986: 64, 65; 1989: 10). "Rather than a desire for an (almost) endlessly delayed fulfillment and a cognitive involvement in pursuing an enigma, early cinema, therefore, attracts in a different manner. It arouses a curiosity that is satisfied by surprise rather than narrative suspense" (Gunning 2004 [1993]: 44).

[71] I employ the definitions by Swiss scholars Margrit Tröhler and Henry Taylor who use the term 'intertextuality' when referring to characters appearances, development, and functions in different films. The term 'transtextuality' implies their presence across media formats (ranging from the theater stage to the ring, comic strips or television). Lastly, they speak of 'paratextuality' when including additional information from posters or statements in the press (H. Taylor and Tröhler 1999: 138).

As mentioned in Part I, when introducing my case study, I place *La India María* within the category of antiheroes, which are defined as heroes using 'unconventional' means to reach their goals and in the end succeed. Throughout the following chapters, I will repeatedly point to the strategies that make her transform from a loser into a hero. For now, I analyze in depth the three main thematic formula story patterns, — the adventurous journey, religion, and submission. More precisely, I demonstrate how the films combine formulaic stories with elements of attraction and spectacle and how these story formulas determine, among other factors, the various possible receptions of *India María* films.

The Formula of the Adventurous Journey

The adventurous journey is considered a "mono-myth" — a ritualized form or narration valid for all cultures and historic eras (Campbell 1999). Five *India María* films adhere to the formula of adventurous journey, in most cases including the topic of migration. Each film narrates how their 'hero', *La India María,* leaves the Mexican countryside and moves to a big city or even further, to the United States. Whenever she migrates away from a rural area where she clearly feels at home and is familiar with cultural customs and daily routines, upon her arrival to the new destination she is confronted with an alien environment. Not only does she encounter characters who try to get in her way, but the city itself, and the United States, become antagonists rather than mere settings. In the opening scenes, *La India María* is usually depicted riding calmly on a donkey through her hometown, or at the outskirts of the big city. In the final scenes, she either returns home to rural Mexico or, as suggested by either musical score or a voice-over narrator, she will eventually return there. At the end of each film, *La India María* proves her abilities and triumphs. These story patterns are combined and punctuated with the display of numerous spectacles.

In TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO / STUPID STUPID, BUT NOT THAT MUCH (Fernando Cortés, MX, 1972), the first feature in which Velasco plays the starring role, *La India María* leaves her hometown determined to make a living in Mexico City. Upon her arrival she is robbed and loses her cousin's address (established as the loser). After having nowhere to go, and after facing countless challenges and adventures, she appears in a TV show, is recognized and reunited with her cousin. She then begins to work in the house of a wealthy widow where she prevents her employer's jewels from being stolen and averts an insurance scam. At the end of the film, she returns to her hometown and establishes a school (becomes a hero). The structure of the storyline clearly corresponds to the classical patterns of narration with its conflicts, turning points, and resolution. It follows but inverts the patterns of a classical journey with a hero (in this case, *La India María,* who uses strategies of a loser) who comes to terms with herself.

Already the first *India María* film, TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO clearly establishes the formula of the adventurous journey of an antihero, which will later be repeated in

countless *India María* films. In addition to the narrative structure, the plot is interwoven with various spectacles. In one scene, for instance, a song is performed in full length by *La India María* in a large church square. Several dancers with flamboyant feathered costumes accompany her and transform the performance into even more of a spectacle. This setup is clearly intended to favorably display the spectacle.

Ill. 37 and Ill. 38: Already in the first film TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1972), Velasco as *La India María* performs a dance routine, singing a song in an indigenous language in front of a Church in Mexico City.

Ill. 39: In TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1972) like in most films of the adventurous journey, *La India María* in the end returns to her home town (production still *Diana Films*).

A decade later, and after starring in various other films, EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA / WHO DOESN'T RUN, FLIES (MX, 1982) by Gilberto Martínez Solares, unfolds similarly in both story and structure. This time *La India María* travels to Mexico City to resolve a conflict over property rights. Shortly after her arrival she is arrested. In jail, she befriends a single mother. After her release, she seeks out her new friend's children and, again, gains experience through countless adventures in the city. By the end, she wins a wrestling match and proves her ability to triumph in an urban environment. Accompanying the final scene, Velasco's off-screen voice is heard singing "*a mi pueblito volverá*" (I will return to my little town), and suggests *India María*'s eventual return home to the countryside. The song underlines that her newfound strength is founded on an unbreakable connection with her origins.

In EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA, the capital city and the character's slapstick performance constitute the most important displays of spectacle. *La India María* is pushed around, stumbles out of an overcrowded subway, and is nearly hit by a car several times. Such ostentatious displays continue in jail. There she rinses a group of women down with a high pressure hose, provokes mass hysteria, and initiates a large-scale pillow fight that sends feathers flying everywhere. This scene is followed by a long sequence with fights in a marketplace and a kitchen, featuring crowds who use fruits and pans as missiles. All fights are caused by *La India María.* Later she drives a car around recklessly and knocks over everything that crosses her path, including nuns, policemen, and vending stalls. Various special effects are used to exaggerate the fantastic nature of these episodes, such as a blind man's eyes that spin in endless circles. Finally, a fight in a wrestling ring concludes the film and lasts over fifteen minutes, stressing the wrestling match as a spectacle of the body associating Mexico's highly mediated sport, whether in the ring, the prison or the streets of the capital city, with the struggle of the migration journey.

Ill. 40, Ill. 41, Ill. 42 and Ill. 43: In EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (1982) numerous spectacles such as fights in a jail or a car race interrupt the story.

The next year Velasco produces and directs another feature film, EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO / THE FEATHERED COYOTE (MX, 1983), which like the ones before, conforms to the formula and aims to fascinate spectators with numerous attractions. Two scenes are of particular interest. In one scene *La India María* enters a disco and performs a dance routine lasting well over ten minutes. The lighting, special effects, camera moves, and musical score conspire to give the scene an almost experimental touch, while allowing spectators to fully enjoy the extravagant display of the actress' body and her movements.

In one scene, *La India María* jumps off the high cliffs of Acapulco and dives into the ocean — here, once again, Velasco is staging the body as spectacle. Significantly, as with the wrestling match in EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA, this key image of EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO transgresses a gendered action. The cliffs of Acapulco are a famous tourist attraction where young men show off their bravery and athletic bodies by throwing themselves into the water when the tide comes in. Hence, the cliffs are clearly defined as a place where the male body defeats the forces of nature. By jumping off the cliffs, *La India María* breaches a space that is conventionally reserved for the other sex.

Not only the spectacles displayed, but also the storyline of EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO adheres to the formula of the adventurous journey. *India María* travels to Acapulco out of economic necessity. She attends an archeological conference where she sells copies of a valuable artifact, 'the feathered coyote'. After producing several copies, confusion arises about the original. A long adventurous search through urban Acapulco begins and ultimately takes her to a club and then to the cliffs. Besides depicting the story of an adventurous journey, the film also clearly refers to Mexico's history and celebrates the country's indigenous heritage, and at the same time mocks the widespread sale of illegal copies in the country.

Ill. 44: In EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983) *La India María* throws herself off the cliffs in Acapulco almost as elegantly as one of the brave divers. This reduces her image to the spectacle of the body and, at the same time, breaches a space reserved for the other sex, iconic of a national myth.

All of the films treated so far — TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO, EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA and EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO — take place exclusively within the country where the adventurous journey occurs in a singularly Mexican context. Limited to national borders, all three of these features are marked, nonetheless, by oppositions. The country and capital city come to life in scenes depicting daily urban routines and situations, from markets and traffic to prisons, church squares and wrestling matches, all of which stand out in stark contrast to the character of *La India María*. In fact, this incongruous difference triggers many comic moments that are staged as attractions displayed explicitly for the camera.

Ill. 45 and Ill. 46: In films of the formula 'adventurous journey', here TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO, the city and the countryside are depicted as contrasts.

Similar cultural clashes lie at the core of two other adventurous journey films, OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (Gilberto Martínez Solares and María Elena Velasco, MX, 1981) and NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ / NEITHER FROM HERE, NOR FROM THERE (María Elena Velasco, MX, 1988), this time including the journey from Mexico to the United States and setting up a contrast between the national and the foreign as a way to create comic moments

and, in the process, appeal to the audiences' diasporic experience. In the opening sequence of OKEY, MISTER PANCHO *La India María* is depicted, once again, living happily in the Mexican countryside. That is, until a plane piloted by an American crashes next to her house. *La India María* takes care of the wounded pilot who has fallen from the sky and she even agrees to illegally cross the border to the United States and deliver a package he claims contains medicine for his mother. On her way, when crossing the border, she meets a Native American and a group of Mexican migrants. Eventually, she discovers that she is about to become the victim of a conspiracy, but instead of giving up she asserts herself against a group of thugs. At the end of the film she returns to Mexico as a heroine, fulfilling the formula of the migration journey characteristic of all *India María* films to date.

In the case of OKEY, MISTER PANCHO, the display of spectacle mainly occurs during the central character's journey. For instance, in a scene towards the end of the film when she is still in the United States *La India María* enters a gym. Like the wrestling match typical to a Mexican context and pivotal to the story of EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA, here the American gym is used to create a spectacle of display of bodies. This becomes the main attraction and function of the scene, and can be described simply as a series of acrobatic numbers. To the amazement of viewers, *La India María* fights with a horde of topless wrestlers, performs gymnastics and karate, and ends up in a gay sauna. This scene, analogous to many others, in most *India María* films, clearly focuses on the display of spectacles and very little on their logical integration into the story.


Ill. 47 and Ill. 48: In OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) *La India María* enters a gym and numerous spectacles are displayed.

In NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ, *La India María* embarks to the United States yet again, this time to earn money to buy a tractor upon her return to Mexico. However, her struggles to find a job become an obstacle to her plans. Unable to understand the language, she is exploited as cheap labor and ends up aimlessly wandering the streets of Los Angeles. Ultimately, she is relieved to be deported. Just as during the imprisonment in EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA, in this film *La India María* puts herself, yet again in risky situations.

Employed at a factory or a restaurant, she is persecuted by the migration police and by the Russian mafia. This time, however, due to the fact that she does not speak English or understand the everyday habits of Americans. Simple daily tasks such as eating, finding a place to sleep, or going to the bathroom become spectacular challenges that are displayed at length. Although *La India María* is consistently portrayed as helpless in the face of new alien environments, she manages to exercise a certain degree of control. And in the end, she always triumphs and therby aquires traits of a hero.

In summary, it can be said that the formula of the adventurous journey engages spectators by adhering to a set of classical plot elements punctuated by numerous visual spectacles that, through comedy goad the audience into enjoying the humor of a typically difficult subject. The use and purpose of the mechanism of comic spectacle is of particular importance since the subject of migration does not necessarily lend itself to comedy. On the contrary, the theme addresses many serious and even painful aspects of a rural/urban diasporic journey and transnational migration. Needless to say, many viewers of *India María* film would be well aware of how this reflects their own personal experience. A full discussion of the various aspects of diaspora and this mode of reception of *La India María* films follow in a later chapter.

For now, in keeping with the subject of formulaic storytelling, I will introduce two other types of formulas. Even though the films also address their audience by combining formulaic storytelling with spectacular attractions I will limit their description in detail, since they are very similar to those listed above (sung performances, large brawls, car drives, crashes, slapstick interludes etc.). Instead, I will focus exclusively on the particularities of two corresponding types of formulaic stories, which I identify as the formula of 'religion' and the formula of 'submission'.

The Formula of Religion

Several *India María* films tell stories related to religion. Contrary to the adventurous journey, the religious formula is not based on a myth or an already established story formula, however it can be considered first and foremost as a thematic category. For example, in the films, LA MADRECITA / THE LITTLE NUN (Fernando Cortés, MX, 1974) and SOR TEQUILA / NUN TEQUILA (Rogelio González Jr., MX, 1980), whose storylines are almost identical, *La India María* joins a convent where she has many experiences and adventures. In LA MADRECITA, the first of the two films, it is *La India María* who prevents the closing of a convent facing hard economic times. Not only her skin color, but also how she accomplishes her goals, sets her apart from the other nuns. Spectacular moments include her getting drunk in a bar, being locked up in jail or climbing high poles. SOR TEQUILA could be described as a sequel to LA MADRECITA.[72] Here, *La India María* — called Sister Tequila because of her fondness for this drink — is transferred to

[72] The story here is almost identical to EL PADRECITO / THE LITTLE MONK (Miguel M. Delgado, MX, 1964), which starred *Cantinflas* in the lead role as a priest.

a small town where a local priest has established an authoritarian regime. Her unorthodox methods clash with his, and soon she wins the hearts of the villagers.

In both LA MADRECITA and SOR TEQUILA, the character challenges old-fashioned rules in the Church and the convent. She exposes several taboos, through her unconventional behavior displayed in a series of spectacles. It can even be said that Velasco stresses and even exploits the taboos through her slapstick performance and relentless staged attractions — one gag follows another, leading up to an exaggerated finale. Throughout the film *La India María* climbs trees, does karate, arm wrestling, high jumps, bull fights, helicopter flying and, once again, performs a song. Instead of spiritual values the spectacle of the body is emphasized once again, undermining the unquestioned power of the Church. Although through the protagonist's performance the film reveals the double standards of religious authorities, the character's aim is nevertheless to set a moral example. For instance, at the end of SOR TEQUILA *La India María* convinces several unwed couples to officially marry.

Ill. 49: In two films, LA MADRECITA (1974) and SOR TEQUILA (1980), *La India María* joins a convent and lives through various adventures as an unconventional nun, here in LA MADRECITA she gets drunk in a bar (production still *Diana Films*).

Several films approach the subject of religion from yet another angle, by playfully comparing *La India María* to the holy virgin. In three films — POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! / POOR BUT WITH HONOR (Fernando Cortés, MX, 1973), DURO PERO SEGURO

/ HARD BUT SURE (Fernando Cortés, MX, 1975) and SE EQUIVOCÓ LA CIGÜEÑA / THE STORK WAS WRONG (María Elena Velasco, MX, 1993) — *La India María* is made to believe that she has miraculous powers. Not only does she cure the ill, she even immaculately conceives a child. In POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! *La India María* heals an elderly man with herbs and water from a local spring. Two greedy salesmen then plan to exploit her as a religious figure. Soon the whole town believes in miracles, and she is eventually attributed the status of the holy virgin. Soon an illegitimate baby is placed in her bed and *La India María* is bewildered by unforeseen motherhood. In the end, she gets to the bottom of things and common sense is restored.

Similarly, in DURO PERO SEGURO (1975), *La India María* is believed to have supernatural powers. This time, she sells tacos in front of a television studio. One day, she spots her idol, a famous actor, tries to get near him and causes a disturbance. A security guard hits her and throws her out of the studio. Shortly afterwards the guard wins the lottery. A rumor spreads that hitting *La India María* brings good luck. Consequently, she is punched and beaten by anyone in need of luck. In the end, she once again proves her opponents wrong.

Ill. 50: DURO PERO SEGURO (1975) playfully compares *La India María* to a figure that brings luck when punched or beaten.

Almost two decades later, Velasco's film SE EQUIVOCÓ LA CIGÜEÑA (1993) returns to themes similar to POBRE PERO… ¡HONRADA! (1973), this time, contending with the

twofold destiny of motherhood. One day, *La India María* discovers a baby in her basket. At first, she is shocked and seeks advice from a priest. He scolds her for her inappropriate behavior and then convinces her to look after the child, which he declares must be sent from Heaven. At the same time, however, the child's real parents are pursuing her and in the end she returns the baby to its parents. Like in the previous examples, Velasco negotiates the morals of Christianity by overtly playing and even transgressing them.

As with the formula of the adventurous journey, all five of these films address spectators by means of formulaic storytelling — in this case with a thematic focus on religion — as well as spectacle. In the case of the religious formula, it is worth noting that the Catholic faith still exerts a strong influence on the lives of many Mexicans and Latinos living in the United States. However, these films seem to have had the least lasting impact on viewers. In fact, when asking interviewees to name memorable *India María* films, these are hardly mentioned.

The Formula of Submission

Finally, numerous *India María* features tell stories of social oppression and subsequent class empowerment. In these films, *India María* usually works as a maid in an upper-class household. Comic moments are mainly created either through her refusal to acknowledge other characters' bad nature or her daily resistance to the condescending attitude of her employers. In the course of these stories she defeats her oppressors, voices her opposition to class and ethnic differences and, thereby, unmasks and outwits them. In EL MIEDO NO ANDA EN BURRO / FEAR DOESN'T RIDE ON A DONKEY (MX, 1973) by Fernando Cortés, for example, a wealthy woman leaves her fortune to her cat, which is to be taken care of by her servant, none other than *La India María*. Trying to escape from envious relatives, she takes refuge in an old mansion. Soon she finds monsters attempting to scare and almost kill her, haunt the house. Gradually, she unravels the mystery and reveals the identity of the villain behind the disguises.

In LA COMADRITA / THE FRIEND (MX, 1978) by Fernando Cortés*, La India María* is hired by a Spanish couple to work as a caretaker in Mexico City. While the rich couple is out of town, her relatives in the countryside fall victim to an attack. Their house is burned down and, having nowhere else to go, *La India María* allows them to stay in her employers' villa in the city. Subsequently, they pretend to belong to the upper class, which leads to a number of humorous incidents. Almost a decade later, NI CHANA, NI JUANA / NEITHER CHANA, NOR JUANA (María Elena Velasco, MX, 1985) points again to Mexican class conflicts. The film tells the story of twin sisters who were separated in early childhood. While a wealthy Spanish woman adopts one sister, the other sister remains in a small town in Mexico. One day the poor sister, *La India María,* sets out to find her twin, *Chana*, (also played by Velasco) and who, in the meantime, has become a famous dancer. Throughout the film, the gap between the two sisters from different

social classes leads to numerous conflicts and incongruous situations marked by comedy and spectacle.


Ill. 51 and Ill. 52: In many films, Velasco impersonates *La India María* who works as a servant, here in LA COMADRITA (1978), next to her employers and on the phone.

In films in which *La India María* is a domestic servant, instances of submission and domination are always portrayed with humor. Notably, the character consistently breaks out of her submissive position. In LA COMADRITA, for example, she carries on a private phone conversation with a relative in the presence of her bosses. She comfortably installs herself in an armchair, leans back, and says what she has to say, holding forth about injustice, confidently and in no hurry (see still above). Clearly, her posture and attitude do not correspond to the usual submissive position of servants. By refusing to accept an inferior position Velasco's portrayal of *La India María* adds a comic touch to otherwise common humiliating portraits of indigenous servants in Mexican films.

India María television programs also seem to follow the formula of submission to some extent. In SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO / ALWAYS ON SUNDAY (MX, 1971), Velasco presents a variety of sketches that all stem from the experiences of an indigenous woman in Mexican society. In several episodes she is employed as a domestic servant. In REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE / NESCAFE SHOW (TV, MX, 1971), produced the same year, *La India María* works as a maid at a TV studio and, for comic relief, walks onto the set of the show unexpectedly and always at the wrong moment. Instead of cleaning, bringing coffee, and answering the phone, she tells anecdotes, dances with guests, and generally does things her own way.

Lastly, two other films about submission and social climbing also play with fantasies of power. In both LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL / THE PRESIDENT (Fernando Cortés, MX, 1975) and much later, in LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER / PLEASURES OF POWER (Iván Lipkies, MX, 1999), *La India María* accidentally ends up in a political position. In LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL, she is elected as a municipal president due to a printing error on the election ballot. Once in office, she surprises people with her unconventional

governing methods. For example, she imposes taxes on drinking and gambling, and demands that men give half of their monthly salary to their wives. This wins her the adoration of the people and the women in particular. Her male enemies however hatch plans to overthrow her; unaware of whom they are up against. In the end, as is by now expected, she defeats her opponents and is elected president of the state.

Ill. 53: In LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975) *La India María* accidentally is elected president and experiences a social rise.

Ill. 54: In LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (1999) *La India María*, disguised as a politician, hinders the selling out of Mexico's archeological heritage.

In LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER *La India María* pursues a similar trajectory. Once again, the story unfolds in a small rural town. Right in the middle of a politician's speech, a woman gives birth to two girls. The mother dies and the politician adopts one of the newborn twins. As an adult, one sister (played by Velasco) runs for president of the PUF (*Partido Unico Feminino*) women's party. However, during the campaign she is severely injured. Her twin sister, *La India María* (also played by Velasco) still lives in the countryside, is forced into the role of a cosmopolitan woman and politician. Unlike her sister, she understands the needs of the Mexican people and lives up to her promises. In both films, *La India María* stands out through her behavior and unconventional governing methods — questioning hegemonic power structures and political practices. For instance, she champions the rights of the poor, protects women's rights and fights corruption. In one case, she even protects one of the most sacred sited of Mexican indigenous heritage — preventing American investors from converting the Teotihuacán archeological site, containing several historical pyramid structures, into the theme park, 'Teotihualandia'.

So far, I have identified three main thematic story formulas (adventurous journey, religion, and submission) characteristic of *India María* films, each with slight variations in plot and storyline. Across diverse media formats — from television to film — similar variations and repetitions occur and are contained by the formulaic categories. For

example, all of Velasco's theater sketches and television shows featuring *La India María* adhere to the formula of submission. It is also worth noting that, different formulas often combine and overlap within a single film. For instance, the film TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1972) contains a sequence typical of the submission formula within the overarching narrative structure of an adventurous journey. In this film, *La India María* works as a maid in the big city before returning home to rural Mexico.

In addition, many similarities can be detected across formulas. First and foremost, all feature films, television shows, and theater sketches are comedies. Secondly, they often refer to Mexican practices such as *lucha libre*. Third, they recall Mexico's past by referencing well-known historical events and locations as for instance archeological sites or artifacts. Forth, they use popular stereotypes such as the revolutionary or the virgin. Furthermore, the repetition of story formula brings about the expectation from spectators that the next film will be the same, and yet slightly different: featuring the same character, telling a story through one of the formulaic plots, in a new or similar setting. It can be said that this repetition allows spectators to experience each new twist with a feeling of familiarity, which likely provokes an intensification of viewing pleasure.

I finally arrive at the question: How do thematic story formulas, which clearly bear the signs of producerly texts, address spectators? Most importantly, the formulas evoke what I would call 'ritualized' receptions. Spectators know exactly what they can expect from an *India María* film. As comedies, the films promise entertainment and a happy ending. The formulas further provide a clear fictional framework; hence the spectator does not have to struggle much to discern meaning from the story. Instead, he or she can focus on enjoying the viewing experience and display of spectacle, trusting the films will never get too dramatic. The displayed attractions clearly have the singular aim of providing pleasure and entertaining audiences. Thus, the combination of story formula and moments of spectacle demand relatively little cognitive activity from viewers, who are free to shift their attention to the viewing context by, for example, talking with other audience members, a common viewing practices for Mexican Formula Pictures. Despite the importance of the viewing context, the outlined story formulas tend to proffer a specific reception mode. Throughout this part, I will demonstrate how the adventurous journey formula tends to trigger receptions foregrounding diaspora, while the religion formula can stress the virgin/whore dichotomy leading either to a critical or empowering reception. And finally, the submission formula is likely to provoke an empowering appropriation — stimulating fantasies of overcoming hegemonic power structures. However, before outlining the various reception modes, I wish to take a closer look at the character, *La India María,* herself, because she plays a crucial role in reception.

The *India María* Character Type and Ethnicity

As previously mentioned, the characters of Mexican Formula Pictures are depicted as types. As a pivotal character, *La India María* is the most obvious example of such a character type. Essentially, she could be characterized as naïve, humble, and illiterate — an indigenous woman belonging to Mexico's lowest social class. At the same time, Velasco's performance style is clearly grounded in classic slapstick comedy, not unlike the Three Stooges. With exuberant physical escapades, *La India María* is able to criticize the powerful and turn things to her advantage. Velasco's characterization of *La India María* is highly polysemous. As a member of an ethnic minority and a woman from Mexico's underclass who charms audiences with slapstick performances, the character becomes an amalgamation of various simplified codes and characteristics. While, this makes it easier for audiences to understand her, it can also lead to diametrically opposed receptions. While some viewers see *La India María* as a heroine, others find her representation of ethnicity racist. The wide range of reactions from interviewees shows how diverse interpretations of her character can be. Even with the first productions in the early 1970s, her character provoked various polemical discussions. People, who consider Velasco's portrayal of *La India María* racist, criticize her for perpetuating stereotypes of Indians that had been a staple of Mexican popular culture since the colonial era. Ironically and despite of this harsh critique, a majority of Mexican viewers have celebrated the character as a fighter who takes on the nation's powerful establishment.

On the following pages, I map out how Velasco's characterization of *La India María* confirms ethnic stereotypes and archetypes, and at the same time twists and subverts them, thus allowing for many different layers of meaning and explaining the varied possible receptions. To make distinctions between people according to the color of their skin might, to some extent, make sense within the U.S. context, but in Mexico such an approach is rather unproductive, because most people are *mestizos* — that is, a mixture between white people of Spanish descent and brown people of indigenous descent. In fact, within the Mexican context 'race' seems to be a misleading term. I consequently speak of ethnicity instead.[73] First, I describe the origins of Velasco's *India María*, and then go on to outline similarities with other representations of indigenous Mexican female characters. I also analyze facets of the *India María* character through its representation of ethnicity as well as describe the situation of indigenous women in Mexico and, finally, discuss the slippage between *India María's* image as a character

[73] Contrary to race, ethnicity is not only defined by the color of the skin; it emphasizes cultural practices and beliefs. The term is often used to subdivide nations into subgroups with distinct cultural attitudes (O'Sullivan et al. 1994: 107f). However, the concept of ethnicity also has clear drawbacks. It is based on a Europe-centered approach, suggesting that only minorities are ethnic, while the dominant population is not. Significantly, the concept of ethnicity tends to marginalize some groups, while taking others for granted through its colonizing gaze (Shohat and Stam 1994: 220).

and the image of the actress, María Elena Velasco. Furthermore, I will rely on my research and interviews to draw some conclusions about the character through the lens of her audience. On this point, it is important to remember that viewers always negotiate meanings of films and interpret characters according to their own changing needs. Nevertheless, the interviews point to certain general tendencies, which I attempt to identify and explore in the following pages.

La India María — An Indigenous Street Vendor Woman

Velasco's *India María* was originally inspired by a group of indigenous women from rural Mexico commonly known as *Las Marías*, who began to migrate to Mexico City in the 1960s hoping to improve their lot by selling fruit, candy, and trinkets, and by begging for alms on the streets of the capital.[74] Although the *Las Marías* come from different indigenous groups, most of them are Mazahua (Oehmichen Bazán 2005). There is no doubt that *La India María* represents one of the many marginalized Mazahua women who flooded the streets of the capital. Commenting on the origin of the character, Velasco herself says: "*Viviendo en el D.F. crucé esas mujeres cada día en las calles […] hasta que un día decidí de interpretar una de ellas. Así nació el personaje.*" (Living in Mexico City, I walked by these women everyday. […] One day, it crossed my mind to impersonate one of them. This is how the character was born) (Velasco interviewed by Rohrer 2008).

Ill. 55 and Ill. 56: Velasco invented the character, *La India María,* to portray one of the many marginalized Mazahua women, who have worked in the streets of Mexico city since the 1970 (production stills NI CHANA, NI JUANA (1985) (left) and TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1971)).

Although Velasco is not of pure indigenous decent, but a *mestiza* with an indigenous mother and a Hispanic father, she has always stressed her indigenous features when impersonating *La India María*. In fact, Velasco's stature corresponds to the typical

[74] Historically, indigenous people had begun migrating to the cities earlier. In the 1960s, this trend increased due to the poor living conditions in their homelands as well as the effects of industrialization and governmental policies favoring urban areas.

shape of the indigenous Mazahua women, who are rather short in height. Moreover, in her films, live performances, as well as public appearances she wears clothing that is typical of these same rural indigenous women: a long skirt over an underskirt with lace edges, a thick knitted belt, a brightly colored satin blouse, and typical traditional jewelry. Her long black hair is usually neatly braided and adorned with bright ribbons, and she often wears traditional *huaraches* sandals, or goes barefoot. Sometimes she covers her hair with a *rebozo*, a rectangular shawl, or she wears a cowboy hat. The only two exceptions are the films in which she plays nuns, and wears a religious frock.

Velasco's depiction of *La India María* is further marked by her use of language. She speaks in broken Spanish, provoking misunderstandings and using puns, which often result in double *entendres,* adding layers of meaning. At times, the character erupts into long diatribes about social injustice.[75] Typically, in moments like these, Velasco inserts a few lines in native languages such as Chichimeca and Nahuatl and never translates them into Spanish.

Interestingly, while her on-screen presence spanned a period of 40 years, *La India María* developed minimally as a character throughout this time. Her ethnicity, dress, language, and marked character traits remained consistent throughout. Hence, *La India María* stays true to a few clearly defined characteristics and perfectly fits the description of a type; she stands for a simplified, stable, and clearly structured representation of a woman of a certain ethnic group. The lack of character development is completely intentional. Velasco has regularly referred to viewers who continue watching *La India María* and love her for her unchanging, dependable nature (Fernández Escareño 1996: 124). In an interview given as early as 1974 Velasco gives her typical stand on her characterization of *La India María* during the beginning years of her career:

> Periodista: "Quiere decir que La India María aprende ingles? O que cabe una transformación o evolución en su personaje?" La mujer cordial [Velasco] se exalta: "Nunca! Yo soy La India María y no puedo renunciar a mi burro Filemón, ni a ser La India María. Hay que sincerarse en este oficio" (De La Fuente 1974).
>
> Journalist: "Does this mean that *La India María* will learn English? Or that she will transform and develop?" The sympathetic lady [Velasco] exclaims: "Never, I am *La India María* and I could never leave my donkey *Filemón,* nor my character *La India María.* You simply have to be honest in this business" (De La Fuente 1974).

Significantly, Velasco answers the question as her character. It was only as her career progressed, that Velasco began differentiating between herself, her depiction of the central character and her various roles as actress, director and producer of *India María*

[75] Similar to *Cantinflas*, who became known for his "demo-babble" — an imitation of political speech which aims at pacifying the masses by talking about social justice and democracy in a purely rhetorical form.

films. While at the beginning she may have intentionally blurred the distinctions, Velasco eventually even begins to emphasize the difference between them.

Several factors can be addressed, which allow for a multifaceted reception of *La India María* as an ethnic character. To begin with, I would like to point out again Velasco's physicality and dialogue. In her films, the actress crawls, hops, bounces, jumps, and dances through the story. She and, by implication, her character, are able to perform karate (OKEY, MISTER PANCHO), wrestle (EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA), and climb high trees and walls (SOR TEQUILA), perform acrobatic feats and win a motorcycle race (LA COMADRITA).

In order to assess Velasco's performance, I refer to Dyer's definition: "Performance is what the performer does in addition to the actions/functions she or he performs in the plot and the lines she or he is given to say. Performance is how the action/function is done, how the lines are said" (Dyer cit. in Pearson 1992: 5). As signs of performance, he lists facial expressions, voice, gestures, posture (how someone is standing or sitting), and body movement (all activities). Velasco embodies and performs her character through postures, gestures and movements typical of slapstick and characterized by repeated gags and general 'horseplay'. As is often the case with this style, this characterization of *La India María* has become stereotyped through repetition and reduction of complexity.[76] However, each performance also tests the limits of her 'type', pushing it into the absurd. In many scenes, slapstick acting and exaggerated physicality delimit the character to her bodily presence. Velasco's *India María* can even be compared to Charlie Chaplin's *Tramp* — both characters lean toward the burlesque through the physical expression of nervousness and hyperactivity. Interestingly, both characters represent minority or marginal figures within society who suffer from social and economic exclusion.

Like Chaplin, though perhaps not as refined, Velasco uses slapstick performance and acrobatic stunts — pitting herself against the laws of physics — as a way to depict *La India María's* protest against external oppression. As often in such depictions, this can elicit fantasies of empowerment from spectators. When this is achieved Velasco's characterization transgresses typical representations of indigenous women. As already noted, an emphasis on the body and embodiment of *La India María* by Velasco on and off screen becomes a vehicle for both commenting on and overcoming the limitations and delimitations, cultural and historical, of her character marked by ethnicity. When seen from this perspective the character and films call established ethnic stereotypes and existing social hierarchies into question. Significantly, depending on various factors that

[76] Schweinitz points out that all stereotyped performances and acting clichés such as the burlesque have their origin in the theater and early cinema (2006: 63). Most of the gestures, body language, etc. have a reference in the real world. They have, however, developed autonomously over time, creating a set of performance standards for filmic representation (2006: 65).

I go into later in this chapter, the very same performance might lead a different viewer of the audience to interpret *La India María* as a negative racial stereotype. Velasco is not only accused of presenting a simplified depiction of an indigenous woman but she is also criticized for her 'overacting' which, for example, emphasizes her character's clumsiness. Of course, her slapstick performance might also invite the spectator to enjoy purely physical entertainment, and as a result, other concerns of the character are communicated.

The same contradictory reading of Velasco's body language applies to her speech. By giving *La India María* a heavy accent, she constantly stresses the character's marginality. While her speech is often broken and grammatically incorrect, as mentioned earlier, nuances are created by the use of double *entendres* and hidden meaning evoked with the introduction of phrases in her native language, not translated to Spanish. These partially accessible parentheses in the dialogue mark the character as the 'other', and at the same time, serve as potentially subversive inside jokes for those who understand them. Moreover, in some scenes, when *La India María* confronts other character types such as a corrupt bureaucrat, Velasco uses the encounter to criticize ethnic, gender, or class discrimination, the absurdity of the law, and rampant bureaucracy. Yet again, in such moments, the character draws attention to herself, but this time, Velasco's performance amuses viewers not through the depiction of naiveté but through bravery in pointing out inequalities and standing up for herself — in her own colloquial slang. At the same time, what can be criticized as lack of sophistication in *La India María's* speaking pattern and dialogue with other characters has caused some viewers to categorize the character as a racist depiction of an ethnic minority. This attribution is linked to the character's refusal to develop and improve her skills and therefore *La India María* is understood as a backwards-oriented depiction of an indigenous woman.

Virgin and Whore — Media Representations

In addition to the inspiration of *Las Marías*, the roots of the character and *India María* films lie in Mexico's legends and myths. *La India María* clearly alludes to two women from Mexico's religious and mythic past, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Malinche,* who together symbolize the virgin/whore dichotomy. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (the Virgin of Guadalupe) is the Mexican (indigenous) embodiment of the Holy Virgin Mary. *Malinche* — originally named Malintzin or Doña Marina (c.1502–c.1529) — is Mexican legend and historical figure from 16th century. Though little is known, it is generally agreed that she was the indigenous interpreter and mistress of Hernán Cortés, one of the first Spanish *conquistadores* to colonize Mexico. *Malinche*'s position in colonial history is similar to that of diplomat and powerful courtesan during the time of first contact. Possibly as a result, she been portrayed as a traitor to her country not only

for helping Cortés but also for bearing him a mestizo son (Hershfield 1996: 18)[77] — thereby becoming a symmetric negative reflection of *La Virgin de Guadalupe*.

Ill. 57: *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is Mexico's indigenous version of the Holy Virgin.

One, if not the main, features of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is her indigenous origin — her dark skin clearly sets her apart from European, and in particular Spanish, images of the Virgin Mary. According to record, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* appeared to the first literate convert and indigenous 'peasant', Indio Juan Diego, in 1531 and was officially declared authentic by the Church a century later. Interestingly, her image appeared on the surface of a canvas made from the fibers of the maguey cactus — a cactus common to the Mexican countryside and featured in various films notably Sergei M. Eisenstein's QUÉ VIVA MÉXICO (US, 1933) largely because of its iconic value. Maguey — from which the national and popular drinks tequila and mescal are extracted — is said to be the embodiment of the pre-Hispanic goddess Mayahuel (in exile) since first contact. With the apparition of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* a Spanish bishop recognized the potential to convince the Catholic Church that Mexico's indigenous people had souls,

[77] Interpretations of this legend have gradually changed over time. Different versions now exist, one of them holding that Malinche was raped by the colonizers.

and hence could be saved. Previously, their lives were of no value, and colonial forces were given license, even from the Church, to abuse and kill 'Indians' without consequence. The apparition of the Virgin in indigenous form, not only gave Aztec and Maya grounds for their own defense, as minimal as it may have been, but her image also served as a bridge between indigenous pre-Hispanic beliefs and Christianity. Over time, a veritable cult developed around the virgin that combined indigenous and Christian practices (Hershfield 1996: 22). Even today, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* occupies an important moral position in Mexico. Every year, and on her name day, hundreds of thousands of believers crawl on their knees to visit her shrine in Mexico City.

Both for Mexican viewers and Latinos living in the USA, the Velasco's *India María* invariably elicits associations with *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. The same can be said for *Malinche,* though perhaps not as evident. Both historical and mythical figures, are by now ubiquitous to everyday Mexican culture and across different genres. Needless to say, the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore is not unique to Mexico. What sets it apart from other cultures, according to Joanne Hershfield, is that this universal dichotomy has been assimilated in Mexico by representations of two local mythical figures — *Malinche* (whore) and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (virgin) — caught in a polarity anchored and deeply embedded in Mexican popular culture through everyday use and continuous re-appropriations (Hershfield 1996: 14).

The archetypal figures of virgin and whore play a key role in the media in Mexico and many other Latin-American countries. In Mexico, the virgin/whore dichotomy can be understood in the context of Mexicanness and observed through the construction of national identity, which was heavily promoted after the Revolution and particular since the 1940s. Both figures, the whore and the virgin, in the identity concept of Mexicanness serve as ready made symbols of woman, assuring stability (Hershfield 1996: 3, 8). In order to fully understand the cultural importance of *India María* films and their reception, it is important to look at previous representations of the virgin/whore dichotomy in Mexico, and how Velasco's films reflects or differs from them. Melodramas produced during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema from 1935 until 1959, as well as the *telenovelas* that followed, produced around the same time as the *India María* films, each contain numerous examples tracing how the dichotomy developed and persisted. For the purposes of this research, I will limit myself to two of the most well-known examples of both genres: the Golden Age feature film MARÍA CANDELARIA by Emilio Fernández (MX, 1944) and the *telenovela* SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA / SIMPLY MARY (Carlos Barrios Porras, PE 1969–1970).

MARÍA CANDELARIA makes reference to the virgin/whore dichotomy on several levels. To begin with, much like Velasco's *India María*, the main character's name is not only *María* but is also the main icon of the film title. Her clothes, personality, and posture

can all be read as direct references to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. She wears a rectangular *rebozo* shawl that emphasizes her face. She is innocent, honest, modest, compassionate, and willing to suffer for others (Hershfield 2001: 55-56). At the end of the film, she is stoned to death when villagers discover a nude picture of her for which she never posed. Her character is thus alternately shown as a virgin and a whore. The way the film cleverly plays with the tensions implicit in this dichotomy generates suspense and leads to unexpected twists.

Ill. 58: Explicit references to the virgin/whore dichotomy are made in MARÍA CANDELARIA (1944).

The filmic representation of the main character in MARÍA CANDELARIA bears extreme resemblance to the Virgin Mary, and in particular to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as she appears elsewhere in myriad of forms throughout Mexico. There is one marked difference, however. Like all other Golden Age melodramas featuring this mythical figure — her face has European instead of indigenous features. Casting *María* in this light reflects the dominant values of the time — it was, after all, an unquestioned common practice in Mexican films of the 1940s and 1950s for actresses of Spanish descent to play indigenous women. *La India María* represents a clear departure from such practices, since Velasco's appearance, from her facial features to her stature, is clearly indigenous.

While many Mexican Golden Age melodramas emphasized the ambivalence contained in the virgin/whore dichotomy, the *telenovelas* placed more emphasis on the virgin figure. The most famous and influential *María* in the history of Latin-American media is the heroine of the Peruvian *telenovela* SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA.[78] Spanning 448 one-hour episodes, this television series was broadcast Monday to Friday throughout Latin America from early 1969 until the end of 1970. The series tells the story of a young uneducated woman who moves to the city, where she becomes lost and unhappy. Finally, she finds a job as a housekeeper, but her bad luck continues. Her boss exploits her, she is forced to have sex, and soon after she falls pregnant. Despite her difficulties, *María* refuses to give up. She begins to take classes in handicrafts during her spare time and, after many years she triumphs as a successful fashion designer. This portrayal of an honest, industrious and ambitious working-class woman was a huge success with Latin American audiences. In Mexico, the show boasted TV ratings of 56 percent, and some episodes even surpassed the ratings for the soccer world championship. In Peru, the average ratings for this *telenovela* measured 85 percent (Rogers and Singhal 1999: 32–33).

Ana Lopez, an expert and scholar in Latin-American film, explains the success of SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA primarily by its reference to current social themes such as the discrepancy between the city and the countryside (López 1995: 265). For scholars Everett Rogers and Arvid Singhal, by contrast, it is the heroine's archetypal characteristics that mainly appeal to viewers. They argue that *María* embodies in a single person universally apprehensible wishes and experiences. Largely due to her similarities with the holy Virgin, *María* becomes a moral authority and role model. At the same time, and significant to my research, she does not allow social norms to dictate her behavior. Quite the contrary, she pursues her goals with determination and perseverance until she finally achieves social and career success. Interestingly, for this reason, the *telenovela* also provoked harsh criticism. Some viewers disliked the story's happy ending, which they perceive as unrealistic.

Nevertheless, public adoration of SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA far outweighs its criticism and the *telenovela* has enjoyed a longstanding broadcast across Latin America. Public support of the show reached extreme proportions and *María's* character achieved a qualitative impact on individual viewers. For example, after the Peruvian press announced the heroine's marriage in a future episode, over ten thousand fans dressed-up for the occasion and congregated at the church where the wedding scenes were be shot

[78] In Latin America alone, five different TV versions of SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA were broadcast, and each one was a popular success. The Peruvian version was an adaptation of an Argentinian *radionovela* (1967–1968); Venezuela produced a third version in 1972. The first color-film version followed in Argentina in the early 1980s, and in Mexico in 1989. In addition to numerous versions of the *radionovelas*, two additional feature films of the same title were released in cinemas and on television (Rogers and Singhal 1999: 39).

(Rogers and Singhal 1999: 25). Moreover, during the years that SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA was broadcast, sewing machine sales increased dramatically. Such applications, and other similar appropriations of the *telenovela* and its protagonist to the everyday life of TV viewers demonstrate that a majority of audiences identify with the figure *María* represents. Significantly for my purposes, housekeepers in Peru who call themselves *Las Marías* formed a group whose objective was to denounce the low social status of their profession and the discriminating treatment of indigenous employees (Rogers and Singhal 1999: 42). Since there is no research on the subject, it is unclear whether the name of this famous *telenovela* heroine influenced, as it did in Peru, the designation of indigenous women street vendors in Mexico. Considering the extraordinary success of the TV series in Mexico, it would come as no surprise if it had.

One thing is clear, though: both the street vendors and the *telenovela* SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA were a point of reference and source of inspiration for Velasco in developing the *India María* character and story formulas. Several *India María* films quote the *telenovela* explicitly and/or refer to it implicitly, such as in the case of TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1972). As I described earlier in this chapter, the film starts with *India María's* journey to Mexico City in search of her cousin and work. After struggling through many obstacles she somehow ends up in a television show. The moderator of the program proudly introduces her to audiences as a 'classic Maria' referring to the indigenous street vendors *Las Marías*. Subsequently, the same name takes on opposite value when a political functionary belittles her as "*simplemente María*". The Politian's humiliating comment not only refers to *La India María's* low social status but also cements her association with the famous *telenovela*. Significantly, these examples are explicit references to the impact of the *telenovela* and the power of media representation — both designations are spoken by men in positions of power and dictate not only how the character is seen, but also how she is expected to behave. Dialogues and scenarios such as these, serve to elicit clear spectator expectations of the character's personality and behavior: a stereotypical *María* has to work hard and suffer indignity.

Ill. 59: In TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO (1972) allusions are made to María, the protagonist of the *telenovela* SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA.

Aside from such explicit references, there are also subtler ones detectable through story and plot. For example, in the same film, by going to the big city to find work *La India María* also hopes to reunite with her cousin. Significantly, upon *La India María*'s arrival her purse is stolen, and with it, her cousin's address. Only after trying desperately and unsuccessfully to find her cousin, does *India María* achieve equal status to other *María* figures, through her recognition, identification and final attribution of her title, by both the media (TV broadcaster) and the establishment (politician). The overall plot structure also seems to mirror how Velasco herself, in the embodiment and construction of *La India María,* is following in the footsteps not only of the protagonist of the *telenovela*, but also of everything it represents both in its function and its legacy as a huge media success.

Just like the heroine of the *telenovela*, *La India María* can be described as good-natured and naïve. However, these characteristics are so strongly exaggerated in Velasco's portrayal and in her interaction with other characters in the film, that *La India María* is revealed as a stereotype. Contrary to *María* in the *telenovela*, who learns from her initial mistakes, *La India María* does not evolve. As a principle, she resists all outside influence and refuses to learn to read or write, even when her opponents take advantage of her poor education to humiliate her. This quality of the character's portrayal has

earned her harsh criticism. Yet Velasco has given *La India María* other ways of fighting back. Through her physical daring, for instance, she regularly produces hilarious gags. Responding to discouragement and oppression with humor, Velasco's *India María* — unlike the standard convention of *telenovelas* and melodramas — is a stranger to crying fits. Upon closer inspection it would seem that the figure of *María*, both in the *telenovela* SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA and the film MARÍA CANDELARIA, has to suffer and hold onto her goals in order to achieve success — or else die. In SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA for instance, *María's* employer rapes her, but nevertheless, she is determined to pursue her goal of becoming a fashion designer. In MARÍA CANDELARIA the main character must die, because — although innocent — a nude painting of her is discovered. In other words, the conventional representations of a *María* prescribe that either she manages to overcome social barriers and lead a better life, or achieve moral purity through death, the ultimate self-sacrifice.

India María films work completely differently — any kind of suffering seems pointless since it does not help to achieve any goals. Without precedent, Velasco alters a crucial standard potentially dislodging the character from what is arguably, and to the chagrin of her critics, an even more static representation of *María*. Velasco paints a less romantic picture. The story usually ends back where the heroine began. If she does end up climbing the social ladder, which hardly ever happens, it is purely by chance, as in LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPIAL (1975), in which *La India María* is accidentally elected president due to a printing error (instead of "Mario", it says "María" on the ballots). Similarly, in LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (1999) *La India María* is able to replace the presidential candidate simply because they look alike.

Thus, the character *La India María* alludes to the stereotype *María* by subverting and transgressing it. Velasco's embodiment of the character rejects the tears and the position of 'victim' to which the melodramas ascribe the *María* figure. She also plays with aspects of the virgin/whore dichotomy in conventional media representations and in particular melodramas. Velasco thereby prevents the falling back into martyrdom and self-sacrifice (death) as the only option that *María*, the virgin, has in order to avoid falling into her negative mirror: the whore.

In contrast to her predecessors, films and television series featuring *La India María* give direct reference to both, the virgin and the whore, as well as the dichotomy they represent. For obvious reasons, this tends to occur mostly in films that conform to the formula of religion. The subject is broached most explicitly in two films: POBRE PERO... ¡HONRADA! (1973) and DURO PERO SEGURO (1978). The premise of both films sets up the character, *La India María,* as a holy virgin who is able to perform miracles. In POBRE PERO... ¡HONRADA! she saves lives with miracle water. Rumors of her special gift spread quickly and soon the first scoundrels are knocking on her door with the intention of taking advantage of her. Soon, the entire village is playing along. Finally, they talk

her into looking after an illegitimate *mestizo* child (a reference to *Malinche*) and into believing that she must have conceived the child immaculately. Here, the virgin/whore dichotomy functions as a ploy against which *La India María* must struggle. It creates the main suspense of the film, allowing viewers to hope that she will uncover the plot and defend herself.


Ill. 60 and Ill. 61: Many *India María* films allude to the image of the virgin, but transgresses it. Here in POBRE PERO... ¡HONRADA! (left) and in LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (right).

In DURO PERO SEGURO, a man forces *La India María* to change her vending location, and hits her in the process. The next day the same man wins the lottery, and soon rumors abound that beating *La India María* brings luck. Mayhem ensues through exaggerated and comic scenes choreographing *La India María* being beaten in all kinds of different ways by different characters. Velasco manages to link the delimitation of her identity through its association with the holy virgin to physical and psychological suffering, exaggerating and parodying what was taken as a norm by her antecedents during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. Unlike her predecessors, *La India María's* new-found status and virginal identity mainly causes her problems rather than opening up new opportunities or helping her to achieve moral goals. An exaggerated rendition of the prescribed characteristics, once again, serves to both reveal and aggravate a stereotype. The example above of a public beating illustrates perfectly how *India María* films evoke such contradictory receptions — which can either be perceived as funny or simply as horrifying. The slapstick violence employed in the scene brutalizing the character, *La India María,* literalizes what in melodrama is only a tacit threat. This approach can be interpreted at face value, to not only accept but also condone the mistreatment of an ethnic minority for the amusement of viewers. At the same time, an opposite reading is possible, in which the figure, much like the melodramas and *telenovelas*, becomes a symbol of resistance and fantasies of social climbing are toyed with. In all cases *María's* oppression has this effect. What makes this style of representation different is the non-evolutionary nature of the character. Her representation remind me of characters such as 'Borat' (Sacha Baron Cohen) which also plays with the discomfort of viewers witnessing, and therefore allowing the violence,

which makes them either complicit (identified with the perpetrators), or, when the suffering doesn't lead anywhere makes the beating seem all the more absurd and pointless. As it is the case with the *India María* films for which the beatings are revealed as senseless and therefore less acceptable.

The use of archetypes is common for explaining the popularity of figures like *María*. Hershfield emphasizes her archetypal status in classical melodrama, while Rogers and Singhal explain, in part, the acceptance of SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA through its application of archetypes. In their view, the *telenovela's* protagonist unites three 'archetypes': the self-determined woman, the disobedient heroine, and the fearless fighter (Rogers and Singhal 1999: 32). Broken down this way she is clearly aligned with Velasco's character, and it makes sense to read *La India María* as a reincarnation of the same archetypes and with interest to the long lasting developpment. However, relegating Velasco's work to archetypal representation seems to fall short of fully explaining the phenomenon. The protagonist of *India María* films, unlike her predecessors, is located at the intersection and hovers between historical concepts of archetypes and mediated stereotypes. To emphasize the universal validity of characters, an interpretation that is based on the concept of archetypes, overlooks the fact that motifs, such as the virgin/whore dichotomy, also always function as stereotypes. Moreover, according to Jörg Schweinitz, the structural concept of the stereotype is better suited than the archetype to explain patterns of repetition and reoccurring motifs, since it emphasizes the gradual sedimentation and historical fluctuation of such motifs within media processes (Schweinitz 2006: 36).

This applies especially to *La India María* who, as I have tried to show, is a character type that not only refers to the century-old myths of *Malinche* and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, but also playfully alludes to facets of more recent representations of the *María* motif in Mexico and Latin America. Hence, *La India María*, her character and films, refer to the mythical dichotomy of the whore and the virgin, where two opposite archetypes merged — which found expression in melodramas such as MARÍA CANDELARIA, and a *telenovela* like SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA — to form a new stereotype: *María.*

As a result, *La India María* can be understood as a character type that references both to the archetypal virgin/whore dichotomy and, at the same time, is a variation of the stereotyped *María* developed through a myriad of media representations over years. Through the course of time, this stereotype has been reduced by repetition to an almost empty shell. By quoting tired clichés, Velasco presents the stereotype for what it is, exaggerates it and, in turn, encourages an ironic reflexivity. The repeated use of the *María* stereotype — in combination with the mentioned transgressions and reversals — leads some viewers to dwell on the disruptions.

Each film reenacts a disclosure of the stereotype and in some cases, even engages in a parody of genres through a combination of Velasco's acting style, a cheap production mode and resulting aesthetic choices. The film EL MIEDO NO ANDA DE BURRO (1973), for instance, parodies the horror movie genre. *La India María* is threatened by silly monsters that make her scream throughout the entire film. Considering how harmless the creatures are, her expression of fear seems so utterly exaggerated it becomes humorous. Not only is the slapstick exaggerating her fear and the character's cliché naiveté, but it is also parodying the inability of the film director and producer to create expensive special effects that would render the monsters at all believable. By playing with and exaggerating her real economic limitations, Velasco exploits her position as an actress and public persona.

Ill. 62: In EL MIEDO NO ANDA DE BURRO (1973) Velasco breaches her character type and thereby the film becomes a parody of the horror genre.

The German film scholar Knut Hickethier has written about series figures: "The 'senseless', bizarre, provocative behavior of series figures often serves the function of allowing spectators to disassociate from character behavior and prove their 'normality'" (Hickethier 1991: 62). This also applies to *India María* films, in which the heroine's exaggerated behavior sets her apart; this contrast offers the audience the chance to feel comfortably 'normal'. One can assume that a close identification with *La India María* occurs only rarely. In fact, most interviewees in my study do maintain a certain distance from the ethnic character type and antics on display. This perspective, in turn, enables

critical reflection on the use of types. *La India María's* excessive physicality and the films' exaggerated emphasis on stereotypical or archetypal characteristics and behavioral patterns lead to a double disclosure. Both film and character are meant to function as recognizable repetitions and viewers are invited to amuse themselves at the expense of an oversimplified pattern.

My interviews confirmed the assumption that some viewers perceive *La India María* as an exaggerated stereotype. This reception is predominant particularly among Latinos in the United States, who have lived away from their homeland for an extended period of time. Significantly, it would also seem that viewers enjoy the style of films and stereotypical characters, which emphasize a widespread prejudice against Mexico and Latin America as being 'underdeveloped'. Films that parody economic restrictions and other characteristics of so-called 'underdeveloped' nations take on these aspects of *María*, her backward ways and economic struggle.

The *María* character type is also evident in other kinds of Mexican Formula Pictures other than *India María* films. Much in the same way as *India María* films, they refer to established stereotypes and mythical figures in order to cite and exaggerate them. The shared tactics of exaggeration among producers of Mexican Formula Pictures to some extent serves to expose Mexican filmmaking in general, both on an ideological and aesthetic level. Mexican Formula Pictures have been discredited, since they often lack the seriousness of earlier films, in particular those from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (Ramírez Berg 1992: 35). In the shadow of such an internationally successful era of Mexican filmmaking, instead of presenting something new, producers decided, instead, to recycle and reshape established stories, characters and spectacles. Through repetition, exaggerating and parody, these films exposed the stereotypes that represent and promote cultural biases and prejudices by now endemic to Mexican society. By necessity, this also leads to certain discontinuities that are manifested in the treatment of female characters and, notably, offers the potential of their emancipation from the trappings of the virgin/whore dichotomy.

Mexico's Indigenous People and Their Representation in the Media

India María films represent, in the end, more than a quotation, repetition or exaggeration of the long-established *María* type and the virgin/whore dichotomy. In order to fully understand the reception of her ethnicity, it is important to also include the context. Therefore, I will briefly outline the situation of Mexico's indigenous people and analyze its representation in the media. I wish to emphasize that my explorations are not all encompassing, but rather, keep them to what seems necessary and possible within the frame of this research. Nevertheless, it should suffice at the least to point to the fact that some awareness about the context informs audience reception of *La India María,* the films and central character.

Nowadays, according to statistics from the Mexican government, approximately eight to ten million Mexicans identify as indigenous. That represents about ten percent of the overall population. In addition, a majority of Mexicans define themselves as *mestizos*, people of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent.[79] Sixty-two indigenous languages are officially recognized in Mexico, and many of these are still spoken today. Despite the considerable number of indigenous people, they hardly ever occupy political offices or executive positions. Often barely able to eke out a living and isolated from mainstream society, they clearly belong to Mexico's lower class.

The economic marginalization of indigenous people is reflected in their treatment by the media. The country's media, from radio to newspapers and television, largely ignore indigenous concerns with the except of covering social unrest in specific geographical areas such as Chiapas, or uprisings such as demonstrations in which parts of the indigenous population try to voice their demands. This situation is also reflected in Mexican filmmaking. Charles Ramírez Berg summarizes the situation as follows:

> Revered in history, Indians are neglected in fact, relegated to the fringes of Mexican life. The same holds true for movies, where, in the main, *los indios* are Mexican cinema's structured absence (Ramírez Berg 1992: 138).

Although Ramírez Berg's statement is clearly meant to be polemical, it is impossible to deny that indigenous people hardly feature in Mexican films. When they do appear, it is in submissive roles such as henchmen, employees of white protagonists, or as the object of humor. According to Ramírez Berg, representation of indigenous characters in Mexican films can be reduced to a few characteristics: "Besides the dark skin color, they are recognized by their black straight hair, their extremely submissive attitude and hopping, and their 'sing-song' Spanish with mispronounced words" (Ramírez Berg 1992: 138). While Ramírez Berg's observations are widely accepted, I believe they don't paint the full picture. Individual films, in particular the melodramas of the Golden Age, tell stories about indigenous characters and at times put them center stage.

The film historian David Wilt suggests dividing films with indigenous protagonists into the following six categories. On the silver screen, indigenous people are often either presented as 1) members of an advanced civilization, or 2) as barbarians. Wilt also identifies a third category that depicts what he terms "contemporary Mexican Indians". These films focus on the history of oppression and the clash of cultures. Another category consists of films illustrating the lives of notable indigenous figures such as Benito Juárez, the Virgin of Guadalupe, or Juan Diego. A fifth category he titles, "primitive savages", depicts indigenous people as wild savages who live in the Mexican jungle, far away from civilization. And the last category is comedies — here, Wilt singles out *La India María* as the most important figure of all (Wilt 1996).

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[79] See http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54 (22.6.2011).

Even though, I find Wilt's categories to be slightly limited, since they are determined according to rudimentary characteristics while different variations in the films are ignored, they nevertheless offer a point of departure for a more in-depth exploration of the representation of indigenous people in Mexican film. His catalogue of films also makes it clear that indigenous characters are not completely absent from Mexican filmmaking. After all, Wilt lists numerous examples in which indigenous figures act as protagonists and not just in insignificant supporting roles (Wilt 1996).

The fact that Wilt creates a unique category for the *India María* films clearly strem from her popularity. Various explanations have been sought for the success of *La India María*, yet the argument that always resurfaces points directly to her ethnicity. The Mexican film scholar Marícruz Castro Ricalde suggests that the character was enthusiastically embraced by television viewers because her image was among the first representations of indigenous characters to circulate widely (Ricalde Castro 2004b: 3). Carmen Huaco-Nuzum also suspects that *La India María's* ethnic characteristics make it easier for the indigenous and mestizo audience to identify with her (Huaco-Nuzum 1992: 129). While both perspectives seem plausible, I was unable to confirm them through my interviews. On the contrary, interviewees gave other reasons for their admiration of the character and never mentioned her ethnicity of their own accord. Even upon specific questioning they would not see her ethnicity as a determining factor. According to them, her marginal economic and social positions as well as her gender are far more important. Interviewees who dislike the character, in contrast, always mention the representation of her ethnicity as negative. These viewers see the image of her ethnicity as racist, discriminating, and compromising to indigenous people. Some emphasize that the films offer simply yet another excuse to ridicule ethnic minorities. In fact, three interviewees wanted to stop the interview because they thought I supported Velasco's representation of indigenous Mexicans. Their refusal was grounded mainly in the slapstick performance and not in the character's dress or skin color. In other words, they would agree to an indigenous character, as long as she was not parodying her own position as the other.

The interviews also revealed that Latinos residing in the United States, as well as younger viewers, were more likely to interpret Velasco's characterization of *La India María* as a direct criticism of ethnic discrimination and social injustice in Mexico. Interviewees within Mexico, in contrast, often saw the character as a racist depiction of an ethnic minority. When asked, "*Que opina usted de La India María*?" (What do you think of *La India María*?) a comment like, "*es racista y se burla de los indígenas*" (she is racist and makes fun of the indigenous) was a common response. Film critics and Mexican intellectuals have argued similarly in the past. For instance, in his review in the newspaper *Excelsior*, journalist Ezequiel Barriga Chávez writes:

> Nada más racista en nuestro contexto que una película de la señora Velasco, en que lo indígena es envilecido en aras de un dudoso humor y los indios y las indias son representados como estúpidos y retrasados mentales que merecen nuestras burlas y nuestra risa. El que en una cinta de esta naturaleza el personaje de la India María constituya la heroína en nada modifica ese esquema clasista y racista (Barriga Chavez 1988b).
>
> There is nothing more racist in our context then a film by Miss Velasco, in which indigenous people are turned into villains through doubtful humor, depicted as stupid and mentally retarded, who deserve to be laughed at. Even if *La India María* is the hero in this film, that doesn't change the fact that it is classist and racist (Barriga Chavez 1988b).

Here Chávez points out an important dilemma of the *India María* character that even when depicted as the hero, she automatically falls back into the category of a negative stereotype because of her ethnicity. Chávez does not consider the possibility that the exaggeration of her characterization, indigenous and otherwise, could serve as the key to emancipation, if only through awareness and recognition. Thus he precludes that representations of the 'poor' whether class or ethnic, need to be depicted as suffering.[80] Chávez' criticism of *La India María* was shared by many intellectuals and critics who detested both the character and Velasco herself.[81]

Initially, I had worked from the assumption that people's reaction to the character's ethnicity would be linked with the viewers' own ethnic backgrounds, i.e. that indigenous viewers would generally rate the character more positively or negatively than white or mestizo viewers. However, no link could be established between interviewees' ethnic roots and their interpretation of the character. It was, rather, the distance from the production, whether geographic or generational, where the divide in reception could be noted. Still, today, the two above-mentioned opposite audience reactions to *La India María* — one affirmative, the other negative — emphasize the character's polysemous nature and the controversy that goes with her marked ethnicity. While *La India María* draws attention to the grievances of indigenous groups she also, and at the same time, represents them. Precisely for this reason, she can be understood as both perpetuating and criticizing their situation.

Velasco and Ethnicity

Although Velasco is *mestizo*, and of mixed ethnicity, her film image (both natural and accentuated) is more closely linked to the ethnic group her character. The reception of *La India María* by the media, that is, the way her image — along with the image of the actress and filmmaker — has been conveyed is an important and contributing factor to issues of ethnicity. Notably, Velasco's standpoint and response to the media gradually changes over the course of time. While she initially insists that the character is inspired

[80] Many Latin American films, depicting the suffering of the indigenous people, do exactly that, without offering alternatives.

[81] During my research, I came across an article accusing the character of not being racist enough. According to the author, the indigenous are supposedly much more repulsive than the *India María* character shows (Montes de Oca Heredia 1993).

by the ethnic minority, Mazahua, and her main goal is to entertain audiences, over the years, Velasco begins to react to her critics and comment on the situation of Mexico's indigenous population. However, Velasco does not voice her position until relatively late, in the 1990s, and one of her first comments seems defensive:

> La interpretación de las llamadas marías, siempre ha sido con respeto, incluso, ellas me ven con cariño. Yo en lo personal deseo que mejoren en todo sentido, porque también son mexicanas (anonymous 1992a).
>
> Interpretation of the so-called *Marías* has always been done with respect, and what's more they themselves hold me dear. Personally, I hope that they improve, in all senses, because they are also Mexican (anonymous 1992a).

In her statement, Velasco makes the case for improving the situation of the Mazahua women based on a common national identity. At the same time, she is also concerned with defending herself. In this defense reaction she is able to turn a mirror to her critics by identifying the labeling of Mazahua women as *Marías*, and benignly accusing her critics of perpetuating the very thing they pretend to condemn. Later on, Velasco begins to actively use her position, off-screen, to demand improvements to the conditions of indigenous women and became an advocate for their rights (S. Cuéllar 1994; García López 1998; J. Hernández 1999; Notimex 1997; Pérez Albarrán 1994; Ruíz 1994; Salázar H. 1995; Segoviano 1994).

Again and again, when interviewed by the press, she would stress the difficulties that Mexico's indigenous women face, criticized their desolate living conditions, and emphasize that these had hardly improved over the years.

> En cuanto a los cambios que han experimentado las llamadas 'Marías' que llegan a la capital, sin reflexionar mucho puntualizó, habrán cambiado de vestido, de lugar, a veces venden cerca de la Torre Latinoamericano, sus condiciones de vida siguen siendo las misma, lamentablemente (Carreño Burgos 1994).
>
> Velasco points to the fact that the changes the so-called '*Marías*', who come to city without thinking too much, have experienced — they might change their dress, their place, and at times they sell their merchandise nearby the Latin American Tower — however their living conditions unfortunately remain the same as before (Carreño Burgos 1994).

Her proposal for change remains however rather vague. In yet another interview, the same year, Velasco goes as far as to promise indigenous Mazahua women financial support (Grajales 1994). Again in 1994, and during the run of her theatre piece, *Mexico canta y aguanta*, Velasco underscores her social commitment by frequently inviting groups of Mazahua women to watch her performances (Garay 1994; A. S. Hernández 1996). The presence of indigenous women (or men) at theatre performances was so uncommon that whether her invitation was a publicity stunt, an expression of solidarity, or both, remains a matter of speculation. Regardless of her critics, there is no doubt that Velasco eventually developed a deeper awareness and sensitivity to indigenous struggles enabling her to take a clear stand in their favor.

Velasco's positioning and the evolution of her response to her critics, can be traced through the 1990's. Early on she takes a stand with statement such as: "*Yo lo [el papel] hago por amor, respeto a mis raices a mis queridos indígenas*" (I play my part out of love, respect for my roots and for my beloved indigenous) (Velasco in Ruíz 1994). Two years later, when asked about her opinion on indigenous political movements, Velasco's answers seem somewhat more blunt. In response to being asked what she thought about the armed resistance in Chiapas and Guerrero, she replied:

> Ay, Dios mío! Creo que a todos nos mortifica saber que a los campesinos no se les da el lugar que realmente merecen. Las autoridades deberían brindarles toda la ayuda que necesitan para trabajar la tierra. Ellos, como todos los mexicanos, tienen derecho a vivir dignamente. A mí me da tristeza que sufran y que no les hagan caso (A. S. Hernández 1996).
>
> Oh my God! I think we all suffer knowing that *campesinos* [indigenous famers] are not given what they deserve. The authorities should give them all the help they need to work the fields; like all Mexicans, they have the right to live in dignity. It makes me sad to know that they suffer and no one cares for them (A. S. Hernández 1996).

Yet when journalists dug deeper, she showed herself to be more humorous and determined.

> Periodista: "Le gustaría platicar con Marcos?" Velasco: "Cuál Marcos? Ah, el subcomandante! Primero que se quite eso que trae… El pasamontañas! Ya luego nos entendemos. Sus intenciones son excelentes, muy buenas; hacer algo por los indígenas chiapanecos y, en general, por todos los del país es bueno. Pero ocultarse detrás de una mascara no es bueno…"(A. S. Hernández 1996).
>
> Journalist: "Would you like to chat with Marcos?" Velasco: "Marcos, who? Ah, the general! Well, first he should remove that thing he's wearing… The balaclava! Then we would understand each other. His intentions are excellent, very good; to do something for the indigenous and more generally for the country is good. But to hide behind a mask is not appropriate…"(A. S. Hernández 1996).

In this interview, Velasco finally speaks out directly in favor of the indigenous struggle. She does this not only by encouraging the public to consider the role of the indigenous people of Mexico, but also by provoking a reception that emphasizes the criticism of injustice. Though Velasco scoffs at *Subcomandate* Marcos — a fellow *mestizo* who, like Velasco, acts as a spokesperson for the indigenous cause — she mostly disagrees with his choice to remain anonymous.

Two years later in a subsequent interview, Velasco underlines her wish to meet important indigenous personalities such as Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú and *Comandante* Ramona of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) — a woman and *Subcomandante* Marco's superior — to better understand the struggles of the indigenous people (García López 1998). Some viewers are clearly attracted to the way Velasco begins expressing her opinions. In these cases, I would argue they enjoy seeing her standing up for a minority and hearing her overt critique of the suppression of indigenous people. Velasco's increasingly explicit comments therefore favor a reception in which the actress and filmmaker, that is, the persona

behind the character, *La India María,* becomes an advocate for indigenous rights. However the critics were so harsh that it was hard for Velasco to shake their accusations, and after all, the character of the films and their protagonist didn't change with Velasco's new public persona.

Before and after Velasco's newfound clarity and political stance in the face of her critics, the press continues repeatedly to attack *India María* films. In the late 1980's as already quoted Ezequiel Barriga Chávez, for instance, declares that there was nothing more racist than a movie by Velasco and is convinced that the main character was a vilifying, debasing depiction of a stupid and mentally retarded Indian (Rohter 1988). A year later, Jorge Ayala Blanco relegates the character to a tragic and simply folkloristic figure (1989: 71). Such critique is not unique to the times of the 1970s and 1980s when most of *India María* films were released, but continue up to this date, well after Velasco's most prolific period of production has ended.

During the presidency of Vicente Fox at the beginning of the 21st century, *La India María* was forced into the limelight because of its depiction of ethnicity. After his election in 2000, Fox had created the new position of Director of Indian Affairs whose task was to protect the rights of the indigenous population. The appointed director and Otomi Indian woman, Xochitl Galvez, set out to eliminate all stereotypical representations of Mexican Indians on television and in the mass media. María Elena Velasco, her films and their protagonist, *La India María,* were an obvious target since, for her, they represented a prime example of a negative depiction of an indigenous woman (Stevenson 2001). According to Galvez, Velasco's characterization of *La India María* repeated the stereotype of Indians as simple-minded, fearful, and fascinated but confused by modern contraptions such as washing machines. Consequently, Galvez tried to ban all *India María* features and series from exhibition. The outright censorship of such a popular media figure sparked a highly polemical discussion. On the one hand, a television documentary LAS DELICIAS DE LA INDIA MARÍA / THE DELICACIES OF LA INDIA MARÍA (Televisa, MX, 2004) was filmed and on the other, reasearchers weighed in on the debate adding their disapproval. The author of a book about Mazahua women provides one example:

> Una de ellas me dijo muy convencida que la dueña del taller era la India María, personaje cómico desarrollado por la actriz María Elena Velasco, difundido por Televicentro (hoy Televisa). Supuestamente la India María se había enriquecido a costa de las Mazahuas. Esta percepción no es tan equivocada si consideramos que el personaje representa a una comerciante ambulante vestido con el atuendo de las mujeres de San Antonio Pueblo Nuevo (Oehmichen Bazán 2005: 201).
>
> One of them convincingly told me that the owner of the shop was *La India María*, the comic character developed by the actress María Elena Velasco and aired on *Televicentro* (today *Televisa*), who had made a fortune on the accounts of the Mazahuas. In fact, this notion is not entirely false because the character represents a street vendor dressed up as the women of San Antonio Pueblo Nuevo (Oehmichen Bazán 2005: 201).

Here Velasco's critics support the arguments for censorship, and condemn *La India María* as a racist representation of an ethnic minority exploited to make a profit. These voices, supported by the new authorities, encouraged an even more critical appropriation of the character and persona by her public. In the end, Velasco succeeded with her resistance to the planned ban and her films have continued to be aired.

To date, most of *India María* films have been uploaded to websites such as YouTubes where they are not only watched, but also commented on by users in Mexico, the United States and internationally. These viewers actively negotiate interpretations and meanings through comments and ensuing discussions that appear online as comment threads next to uploaded YouTube clips of *India María* films and her other TV series.[82] These discussions join the larger debate on whether *La India María* should be seen as a racist depiction or as sign of indigenous pride. Interestingly, on YouTube Velasco's fans avidly defend the character, *La India María,* and counter harsh critical commentaries, constructing a counter-discourse to *La India María* being simply a racist depiction of an ethnic minority. The comments on YouTube also show that supporters of Velasco are becoming more informed and articulate about why and how her films are actually subversive and aim to counter the very thing of which they are accused.

The example given below not only demonstrates the evolution of the debate and contradictory opinions perfectly, but it also shows that some comments are deleted after being published.

[82] Because YouTube only allows film clips of a maximal duration of ten minutes, the films have been uploaded divided into parts. People who comment on Youtube are, contrary to the pure viewers of YouTube clips, easier to trace because they have an account providing some basic information about themselves. For the comments I analyzed, the majority of commenters declared as Mexican residents. The second largest group of users is living in the U.S., and most of them have a Mexican or Latino background. Other contributors are from Peru, Panama, Argentina, Chile, Honduras, and other Latin American countries as well as from Spain. They are predominantly male, ranging from the ages 14 to 44, with a majority of younger users.

Ill. 63: Screenshot of a discussion triggered by a clip of EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (1982) posted on YouTube (October 2010).

One can only speculate about the reasons for the removal of comments such as the one at the top of this discussion. Here the comment was removed by the author himself because he considered it too bee overly harsh or because he felt it was wrong after all. Tracing the discussion, however, can give readers a hint at what may have transpired, and as it seems happened here, the user *superculovacayin* removed a comment, and at the same time entered another one, perhaps with the wish to reframe a previously impulsive response to his interlocutor *naavehe*.

Taking into consideration all the possible receptions and ensuing polemical discussions regarding the characterization of *La India María,* a general description can be drawn as follows. The character is clearly marked as an ethnic type, refers to the *María* media

(stereo)type and plays out the (arche)typal virgin/whore dichotomy, simultaneously breaking with all three. At the same time, the character is modeled on a specific group of indigenous women, so-called *Marías,* who have been selling their wares for decades on the streets of Mexico City. Also, the character can be understood in relation to the current situation of all the indigenous peoples of Mexico many of whom live under difficult circumstances on the margins of society, their struggles and interests hardly represented in the media. Lastly, actress, director, and producer, María Elena Velasco, becomes an increasingly vocal supporter of indigenous rights in the press over the course of her career. Her character, *La India María,* reflects the interplay of meanings derived from myth, media and everyday culture — and is polysemous to the extreme. Together with the given viewing context and paratexts she appeals to viewers in contrasting ways and ultimately encourages two perfectly contradictory receptions: either viewing the figure as a racist representation of an ethnic minority (critical appropriation) or as an exposure of the ethnic discrimination many indigenous Mexicans have to endure (empowering appropriation).

Making Meaning of Gender and Class

India María films, plays, and TV shows are not only assessed on the basis of ethnicity. My interviews demonstrate that class and gender also play a central role in audience appropriations. Having shown how the character's ethnicity encourages either a critical or empowering appropriation, I now wish to analyze an appropriation that is both based on and transgresses gender roles and assignations of class. As in the case of ethnicity, here too the interplay of the character, the filmic text, the image of the actress, director, and producer, Velasco, in the press as well as the viewing context lead to such appropriations. In the following section, I will demonstrate how an empowering reception mode emerges based on class and gender and by which factors it is determined.

Transgressing Gender and Social Roles

La India María fascinates many viewers mainly because her character refuses to conform to traditional roles and their assigned behavioral patterns. With her first appearances in films and television in the early 1970s, her image resisted the dominant media representation of women — she was small, dark-skinned, and covered up modestly in traditional indigenous clothes. Velasco did not present her character as an object of the male gaze, which focuses on the female body as visual spectacle in the same way Laura Mulvey describes in her theories on Visual Pleasure and the gendered ways of seeing in classical narrative cinema (Mulvey 2000).

Interestingly, however, it is the slapstick performances that give Velasco a defiant edge. In her films and sketches, *La India María* uses her physicality to defy those in power — characters often represented as her male oppressors. However, while the stories usually start by emphasizing her social disadvantages (e.g. lack of education and financial resources), she gradually becomes increasingly self-determined, steering the plot, overcoming challenges, and striving for her goals. Throughout the story she acquires narrative agency, an important factor for audience enjoyment, eliciting fantasies of overcoming existing power structures. As mentioned previously, in the film LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975), for instance, *La India María* is accidentally elected to political office. In the Mexican context, the audience can already guess that corrupt politicians will take advantage of this uneducated and illiterate woman. Yet soon enough the smart heroine can see through the men's games. Instead of letting herself be intimidated, she takes action by working against corruption and eliminating her opponents by use of physical skill.

Ill. 64: *La India María* resists common media representations of women — she is entirely covered up and thereby de-sexualized, preventing any erotic gaze.

Ill. 65: *La India María* stands up for her rights in LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975). In this scene, she proudly states: "*aquí mando yo, o sea nosotras las mujeres!*" (I rule here and so to us, the women).

In addition to increasing her own narrative agency, Velasco's *La India María* repeatedly breaks with social and gender norms. In turn, she demands social agency, adding a political dimension. She does this in different ways, by handling male props and appropriating status symbols and even, at times, by invading spaces associated to a higher social class or the opposite sex. To illustrate this claim, I refer to Gabriele Brandstetter's concept of "staging gender". Brandstetter conceives of a process-oriented model (Brandstetter 2003: 26). In this model, depending on the context, different rules apply and either individual or institutional agents participate (Brandstetter 2003: 29).

Though for Brandstetter, this model is mainly used in reference to the stage and science, it is also applicable to film, and more general, society. Again, with the example of LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL, the basic premise is that women have no place on the Mexican political stage, since even today its key positions are dominated by men. By entering political office, *La India María* accesses a male arena (or stage) in which a poor, rural woman seems out of place. This alone leads to numerous comic moments. In order to disguise herself on this 'stage' she decorates herself with various male objects and regalia — she starts carrying a gun and wearing an ammunition belt, which is also a quote from a classic image of woman and the Mexican revolution. In the end, these objects do not give her the authority they represent. Instead *La India María* is unable to move comfortably and, to give just one example of Velasco's wit, through a series of comical slapstick near collisions, *India María* ends up 'accidentally' striking a male colleague in the crotch with the barrel. Clearly, Velasco is playing with gendered connotations attributed to the objects, actions, and spaces so that they serve, like her character, as objects of ridicule. More precisely, the depicted clichés are revealed and fulfill an underlying fantasy such as hitting a man below the belt. On the other hand, Velasco uses self ridicule as a technique, suggesting that in order to ridicule others, she must first ridicule herself, to gain self-awareness und ultimately laughter.

In the same film *La India María* undergoes notable dramatic changes that, in along the lines of Bradstetter's model, can be analyzed in terms of 'space' while, at the same time, refer to 'issues of class'. At the opening of the film, *La India María* lives and works in a simple adobe hut. After her election to office she moves into a luxurious parish hall. While Velasco first accentuates the incongruity of the situation — *La India María* initially seems lost there — she eventually gains confidence and takes over the space by working on her office desk, standing comfortably on the balcony looking over her town or by leading through the annual fair. Soon she tries out a variety of other gendered stages, including a bar, a bullring, etc.

Ill. 66: In LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975) *La India María* appropriates male props such as a gun, but instead of making her look powerful, they become objects of ridicule.

Ill. 67: Paratexts such as the poster enhance and exaggerate motifs of the film.

Traditional gender roles are also subverted on the level of the paratext. The poster for LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL is comprised of cartoon scenes and stills from the film. In the cartoons, *India María* is holding a gun and sporting an ammunition belt; she is seen bullfighting, dancing, falling in love, and being photographed by a white tourist. The poster also contains a still from the actual film, which shows a scene from the bullfight. Similar to the scenes in the film, her physicality is emphasized in the poster. Her 'male' actions are staged as spectacular moments or attractions, attesting to her unusual abilities as a woman. Underlining her physical prowess, not only does she deliberately transcend the limits of gender by performing activities typically reserved for men, but she is also attributed superhero-like powers which stand in stark contrast to the initial description of the character as humble, naïve, and clumsy. Accordingly, the advertising campaign for LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL focuses explicitly on the importance of women in politics:

> "¡Los problemas municipales deben ser solucionadas por una mujer!" La Presidenta Municipal, en el año internacional de la mujer (Dossier Diana Films).
>
> "Political municipal problems have to be solved by a woman!" La Presidenta Municipal, in the international year of the woman (Dossier Diana Films).

The intention of this newspaper advertisement is unmistakable and elicits clear expectations of the film. Potential viewers will anticipate seeing the story of a woman who takes up political office. In this sense, LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL is a perfect illustration of many *India María* films, in which the character cleverly appropriates male props and spaces in order to play with and subvert social and gender roles. The cliff scene in the film EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983) described earlier on page 117, together with the fascination it provokes, can be explained similarly. Here, again, *La India María* dares to enter a male arena, the cliffs, and even takes a perilous dive transgressing traditional gender rules.

To emphasize my point further I wish to remark on an aspect that might at first seem trivial but is worth considering. *La India María* remains single throughout her on-screen presence and only seldom does she fantasize about having a relationship or getting married. In fact, she generally has a rather critical view of marriage. In various films and television shows she repeatedly points to the marital problems of the couples she meets. Additionally, Velasco even records an album in the 1970s with a song about the suffering that marriage brings. Both her character's and Velasco's criticism of marriage are extremely unusual and highly surprising in a Mexican context. Yet this is one reason why women in particular admire the character. Many of my interviewees emphasized that they liked *La India María* because she does what she wants and refuses to let a man control her life.

One of the most important factors contributing to an empowering reception of *India María* films is Velasco's role and her image conveyed in the press. What stands out the most is how Velasco's position within the landscape of film production in Mexico, which can also be considered as a 'stage' in the sense of Brandstetter, to this date remains unique. First of all, María Elena Velasco is one of the most well known female performers in Mexico. Mexican Formula Pictures have produced a series of female stars: Rosa Gloria Chagoyán for the border action films; Isela Vega and Sasha Montenegro for the sexy movies; and even in several women from wrestling films have reached considerable fame. However, female performers have been scarce in the category of Mexican antihero comedies where they mostly figure as supporting actresses to male stars and never reach comparable recognition. Two examples predating the period of Formula Pictures are Delia Magaña, who played with *Cantinflas* in films such as EL SIETE MACHOS / SEVEN MEN (Miguel M. Delgado, MX, 1951), and Dolores Camarillo, another *Cantinflas* sidekick, also known as *Fraustita.* Interestingly, both characters represented extremely modest Mexican women.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, female comedians remained scarce, often impersonating character types such as the *chorolota,* a drunken prostitute, or the *pelangocha*, a robust secretary who's comic style is determined mostly by macho talk (Obscura Gutierrez 1997: 177). Similar to their male counterparts, these female comedians conveyed their humor through dialogue and performance; they all mispronounced words, played with them, or used sentences with double *entendres* (Obscura Gutierrez 1997: 173). For example, Evita Muñoz, also called *Chachita*, played the leading role in a number of Mexican Formula Pictures, including a series of comedies in which she impersonated a witch (1982–1985). However, none of the female comic performers reached comparable fame to Velasco's. The reasons for her outstanding position in Mexican filmmaking might be found in her long-lasting and continuous presence since the 1970s until today.

Ill. 68 and Ill. 69: María Elena Velasco began her career as a supporting actress. Contrary to many other female performers, she startled the Mexican industry with her persistence. Later on in her career, she started directing and producing her own films.

Unlike Velasco's star status as an actress, her other accomplishments, as a director and producer, have been either widely overlooked or deliberately ignored. In numerous books and articles on Mexican female filmmakers, she is simply not mentioned.[83] This is all the more astonishing because female directors and producers were scarce during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, less than a handful of women worked behind the camera: Marcela Fernández Violante, Busi Cortés, María Novaro, and Isela Vega. All of them, with the exception of Vega, went to film school and made auteur films that targeted international festival and art house audiences. Isela Vega, like María Elena Velasco, worked in commercial filmmaking. They learned on the job, as did many other industry professionals working in Mexican Formula Pictures. However, while Vega worked behind the scenes for a few Mexican projects, Velasco, despite the lack of recognition has proved to be the most prolific female director and producer working not only in cinema but also across a variety of formats.

From the beginning until today, men have held most key positions in the Mexican film industry. Rubén Galindo Junior, the producer of numerous Mexican Formula Pictures, explains why, according to him, the field of cinema was not suited for women:

> Es un negocio un poco hostil, es un negocio con un ambiente un poco rudo para una mujer. No es tan atractivo para una mujer estar en un ambiente en que hay desveladas, que hay que estar oyendo gentes decir groserías, estar cargando cables, estar debajo el sol, !Vaya!, es difícil porque es un ambiente de hombres... (Iglesias 1991: 68).

> It is a tough business, a rough environment for a woman. In fact, it is not really appealing to a woman to work under these circumstances, with people swearing, having to carry cables, and being in the sun! Well, it is hard, because it is a male environment…(Iglesias 1991: 68).

Velasco herself agrees with Galindo's admission about the challenges for women in male dominated work environments. During her first interview with me in December 2008 she reflected on her early work experiences in the Mexican film industry, the way that it prepared her to be the filmmaker she wanted to be and would eventually become.

> Yo vengo de la television y soy trabajadora. Los directores solamente me dijeron lo que querían que hacía. Después de un tiempo, me cansé. Yo quería tener más control (Rohrer 2008).

> I came from television and was an ordinary worker. Directors simply told me what to do. My voice was never heard. After a while, I got tired of it. I wanted to have more control (Rohrer 2008).

Velasco's wish to direct her own character led to a repositioning of her status within the industry. Throughout her career, Velasco repeatedly underlines how important directing is to her (Jiménez Patiño 1987). At the same time, she remembers having to deal with numerous challenges imposed by male workers and colleagues who would constantly

[83] See for example (Medrano Platas 1999; Rashkin 2001; Solís 1990), or (Hershfield and Maciel 1999).

defy her instructions on the set or in post-production (H. Hernández 1988b; Rohrer 2008).

> Una vez, yo estaba muy infeliz con el montaje de una de mis películas. Entonces, me fui con el encargado y le pregunté de cambiarlo, pero el estaba ofendido, se enojó, sobre todo porque fue criticado por una mujer. Es duro trabajar como directora. Por supuesto no puedo saber todo, pero en mi posición tienes que dar instrucciones (Rohrer 2008).

> One time, I was extremely unhappy with the edited version of one of my features. I went to the editor and asked him to change it but he was offended more than anything because the criticism came from a woman. It is hard for a woman to work as a director. Of course, I cannot know everything, but in my position one has to give instructions (Rohrer 2008).

Even before, in 1992, Velasco insists that men tend to control the Mexican film industry, and throughout her career, with the exception of the support she feels from her fans, Velasco continues to feel like she is knocking on closed doors.

> Actualmente todavía existe algo de machismo y a los señores no les gusta que la mujer invada sus terrenos, pero no me quejo, soy una afortunada. Sobre todo, el público me ha estimulado en toda mi carrerea (Valencia 1992).

> Today, there is still a bit of machismo around. Men don't like it when women invade their territory, but I can't complain, I am lucky. Above all, the public has motivated me throughout my career (Valencia 1992).

In effect, though Velasco repeatedly discusses the difficulty of her role as a woman in a male-dominated industry, she does so without harping on about the challenges she faces. That being said, reflecting on her role in the Mexican film industry has prompted her call for much needed changes. For instance, she has often criticized fellow producers insisting that films not only be about profit but also about quality (anonymous 1994a; Ramírez 1984, 1985, 1987). In the late 1990s, together with other industry representatives Velasco supports the introduction of a new law designed to protect the country's national film production (E. Alvarez 1998; Notimex 1997).

Advocate for Women's Rights

Not only did Velasco openly talk about her position as a woman in Mexico's film industry, but she also spoke out in favor of women's rights in general. Taking advantage of her star status, when interviewed by the press she would argue in favor of gender equality.

> Sucede que las mujeres – por el hecho de serlo – nos consideramos reprimidas. Los hombres por su parte, no creen en nuestras capacidades y eso no es verdad, el talento es característica de ambos sexos (anonymous 1987a).

> It happens that we women — just for our sex — consider ourselves suppressed. Men, for their part, don't believe in our abilities and that is simply not true because talent is a quality shared by both sexes (anonymous 1987a).

Times and times again, Velasco encourages women to claim their own share of power (anonymous 1994a). She repeatedly points out that more women should occupy key political positions not only in her interviews but also through her films — both LA

PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975) and LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (1999), produced twenty years apart, center on the political ascent of female protagonists (anonymous 1994b). When launching LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (1999), she insists that, one day, many women would rise to powerful positions and even the presidency (De La Cruz Polanco 1998). However, she also stresses that she herself does not intend to enter politics. Instead, she declares her intention to continue conveying political messages as a film director (Ramírez Hernández 1998). Nevertheless, Velasco refrains from making statements on politically sensitive subjects with the single exception on the theme of abortion — astonishing many of her colleagues and audiences. In the late 1990s, Velasco takes a pro-choice stance, even though abortion is still illegal in Mexico at the time and harshly condemned by the Catholic Church which to this date remains extremely powerful in the shaping of people's lives in Mexico (Leal and Pérez 1997).

Following the change in her public persona, notably through the 1990s when she began to exercise her ability to speak out, Velasco herself underwent an empowering process. Through her work and during the course of her career, she increasingly demands more agency from herself and for other women. After, and perhaps because of embodying the character, *La India María,* she eventually gains the influence she seeks — she directs herself, contributes to scripts, and finally establishes her own production company. A similar process of empowerment is evident through her representation in the media over time. By the first decade of the 21st century, after gradually drawing more media attention to women's rights, in 2007 Velasco is finally invited as guest of honor to the Guanajuato film festival and to a gathering of Mexican women filmmakers in Tijuana (Fregoso and Iglesias 1998; M. Hernández 2007). Even though she does not attend, the invitations alone reflect her status as a spokeswoman in the Mexican film industry. Velasco is a rare example of a woman whose success is based on qualities such as talent, determination, and self-awareness — and not beauty. Just like the character, *La India María*, María Elena Velasco has been able to surmount obstacles because she knows what she wants and works hard to achieve it.

In my interviews, Velasco's audiences, especially the women, focus on the empowering aspects of both character and persona. They often claim that Velasco and *La India María* have been underestimated and defend her from her critics by explaining that even though the figure might seem one-dimensional it is, in fact, far more complex. There are many examples of interviews with women who support Velasco with comments like, "*Es una de nosotras*" (she is one of us), or who come to *India María's* defense saying, "*A lo mejor parece tonta, pero en realidad es muy inteligente y además es guapa*" (she might seem stupid, but she is actually very intelligent and pretty, too). Male interviewees often refer to the fact that their wives, grandmothers, and sisters like the character. One taxi driver even adds, "*La India María es la reina de mi vieja*" (*La India María* is my wife's queen).

Comments and replies such as the ones listed above indicate a widespread reception of *La India María* that focuses on female identity. A shared experience, among audience members, of being undervalued seems to have been particularly important for female viewers. The characterization of *La India María*, her slapstick performances and stories that always lead to happy endings are further complimented by Velasco's position as a director and producer within the Mexican film industry, and her representation in the media — all these aspects work together in favor of an empowering appropriation. Such a predominant reception of *India María* films reflects their ability to uncover existing power structures, and even criticizes them. As mentioned earlier, Velasco accomplishes this through a rupture with gendered stereotypes, appropriating gendered props (e.g. objects associated with male dominance) and entering gendered 'stages' (places where men's power is inscribed and determined).

While I was unable to discern a link between the ethnic identity of the viewers and their response to the issue of ethnicity *La India María* represents, the issue of gender was clearly a greater concern for female viewers. At the same time, both geography and generation continue to impact the results of my study on receptions and relevant to gender as well as ethnicity. Notably, younger women in particular, as well as Latinas living abroad in the United States express an admiration for *La India María*, the character and film director — choosing to identify with their empowering approach. Some young women go as far as to actively promote *La India María* by either making her films available online or even appropriating her name as their avatar for online social networks.

Close to the Pueblo


Ill. 70 and Ill. 71: To this date, Velasco with her character *La India María* is much liked by the audience, here two scene on the set of Velasco's latest feature LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA / THE DAUGHTER OF MOCTEZUMA (Iván Lipkies, MX, 2012) shot in May 2011 in the center of Mexico City.

An empowering reception occurs not only via gender concerns, but also in the case of viewers who focus on issues of class and social status. Here, too, relevant appropriations were based on a combination of the character, the films, media representations, and the viewing context. *La India María* obviously belongs to Mexico's lower class. She is of the *pueblo* (people) and became a sort of folk hero who though especially popular with the working class, is also familiar to people from different stratum of society. In an article in the *New York Times*, *India María's* introduction emphasizes her popularity with the *pueblo*.

> Somewhere in the most remote hinterland of Mexico, there just might be a village whose residents have yet to see one of the many movies of *La India María*. But to most Mexicans, the woman with the long braids, bright native costume and guileless smile is a figure almost as familiar as the President, with admirers ranging from the chief executive down to the humblest peasant (Rohter 1988).

The New York Times journalist Rohter goes on to explain *La India María's* popularity with blue-collar Mexicans saying "she provides a rare opportunity [for them] to see themselves and their daily routines portrayed in a sympathetic fashion" (Rohter 1988). While Rohter's explanation may seem somewhat oversimplified, he does make an important point. I would agree that her character is essentially likeable and down-to-earth. She lives in humble circumstances and earns a sparse living as a street vendor or housekeeper. Unable to find work in the country, and in order to better her life, she emigrates to the city where she is forced to live on the margins of society. Instead of complaining, she defies poverty by maintaining honorable principles and a strong sense of optimism. She refuses to accept hypocrisy thereby uncovering hidden power structures and their machinations.

Through the nature of the protagonist's character the constraints of class and social standing is subverted in *India María* films. This is evident particularly in those films with a plot that adheres to the submission formula which plays with the clash and transcendence of social and class distinctions. In LA COMADRITA (1978), for example, the film's premise that *La India María's* lower-class relatives pretend to belong to the country's upper crust. The humor that results is typical of Velasco's slapstick performance strategy. In this case, she directs *La India María's* relatives to imitate and exaggerate the body language and speech of the upper class, such as stiff eating habits, but also to don the clothes and shoes of the house owners, which in turn prevents them from moving freely — reversing the meaning that their postulation represents.

Ill. 72: In LA COMADRITA (1978) *La India María* subverts expectations of social behavior indicative of class, here dress up as a lady, her actions lead to the explosion of the coffee maker.

In contrast to other popular characters from Mexican Formula Pictures such as the famous wrestler, *El Santo*, who, in the course of his on-screen career, turns his back on the lower classes, *La India María* stays true to her humble roots. Up until today, she manages to break loose, make a place for herself on other 'stages' and triumph as a successful heroine. Hence, the representative of Mexico's most economically vulnerable class is given positive connotations, and is shown to be an ally of the weak and the poor. Not only the character positions herself as belonging to the people, but the creative force behind the character Velasco — as actress, director and producer —

presents herself in a similar light through the media. An analysis of newspaper articles about Velasco indicates how Velasco regularly highlights two points: first, she presents herself as a champion of her audience; then, by emphasizing her humility, she aligns herself with her viewers.

Velasco has repeatedly emphasized the importance of her audience. In particular, she has pointed to the fact that a large part of the Mexican population is actually *campesino* (farmers) who can identify with the character (Velez 1989). Furthermore, she praises her audience for being loyal companions to whom she owes a great deal.

> Por eso, mi lucha por llegar a ser, la comparto con el público, que me ha apoyado siempre porque han estado conmigo en las buenas y en las malas… (El Soberbio 1989).
>
> For that reason, I owe and share with my audience the struggle of becoming who I am today. They have always supported me and because they were with me through the good and the bad… (El Soberbio 1989).

In the same article, she also insists that her main goal is to meet her audience's expectations. Moreover, she regularly emphasizes that awards and honors do not mean much to her.[84] Instead, she says that what matters most is the appreciation of her audience (E. Alvarez 1998; El Soberbio 1994). In an interview given almost a decade later with the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, her priorities remain unchanged.

> No busco premios ni reconocimientos de ningún tipo porque mi única y mayor satisfacción me la brinda el público con su cariño y su preferencia (Aviles Duarte 1994).
>
> I don't want prizes or awards of any kind because the most important and only recognition comes from my audience who has ben loving and faithful (Aviles Duarte 1994).

A few times, Velasco goes as far as to refer to her audience as her trophy (Segoviano 1994). A reference like this is a clear signal to her viewers about how seriously she takes them. Velasco continues to express this dedication even during a period when her audiences decline. At one point, she even recommends that, during tough economic times, they spend their money on food rather than movies (Dávalos 1998: 14).

In addition to her pronounced sympathies for her audience Velasco does not see herself as a high-maintenance star but, rather, as a modest person — much like *La India María* (A. S. Hernández 1996). Compounded by so many other similarities, Velasco's emphasis on a close relationship to her audience contributes to slippages between character and persona. A Wikipedia entry even goes as far as to suggest that the character's image is exactly the same as Velasco's. The entry looks further into other factors that contribute to this confusion between character and persona, by making an interesting observation. "Not much about Velasco's private life has been open to the

[84] To this day, Velasco has not received any award in person. When in 1989 she was attributed a prize honoring her career, for instance, she only pointed out that her work could be better and that she is never completely satisfied with what she does (El Soberbio 1989). Thereby, she devalues the importance of awards and strengthens her image as a working woman.

public eye," the entry insightfully points out, "she prefers to be seen by the public as the character she usually plays in her movies."[85] Even though I don't entirely agree with this statement — Velasco has after all cultivated her own, separate image in the media — it is true that contrary to many other film stars Velasco has never made headlines by drawing attention to an extravagant lifestyle or scandals. On the contrary, she has always emphasized her ordinariness, foregrounding humility and her love, for example, of Mexican cuisine.

For the most part, and in particular later on in her career Velasco, distinguishes between her private life and her public persona. When asked about her children or family she has underlined that such personal matters are private (Jiménez 2002; Pacheco 1988). However, she has revealed some details of her everyday life. For instance, she has pointed out that she is not rich stating that she did not produce her first films and hence did not profit from their success (anonymous 1987c). She also emphasizes that she is like everybody else; she drives an inexpensive car, sometimes takes the subway, likes to cook, and lives a simple life (R. E. Flores 2004; Gómezturja ; Morales Valentín 2002). In press interviews, she is enthusiastic about Mexican cuisine and discusses her favorite traditional dishes (Garay 1996; Olaiz 1991; Salázar H. 1995). She even interrupted an interview once, explaining that she was in the middle of cooking beans and had to take them off the stove first: "*Dejame bajarle la lumbre a los frijoles*" (let me turn down the stove, I am preparing beans) (Olaiz 1991). Aside from the topic of food, Velasco also frequently discusses Mexican music and has even recorded several folk songs — emphasizing another element of Mexican popular culture (Garay 1996). Even though, unlike other actors, she never received much attention for her recordings, they nevertheless demonstrate her fondness for traditional music. Finally, Velasco admits to never having received formal training (Morales Valentín 2002; Pacheco 1988). With this statement, she encourages her 'uneducated' viewers to pursue their goals, even if at first they seem unreachable.

Though the difference between Velasco's public persona and *La India María* may at times be controversial, even more polemic is her attitude before the media regarding the question of political empowerment. In the beginning, Velasco maintained that her films were meant for pure entertainment (Pacheco 1988). Later, she refused to make any political statements to the press, and at the same time, declared that had she not become an actress, she would have studied law or political science, or worked as a teacher (V. H. Sánchez 1989b). Even as late as 1988, when her film NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (1988) came out, her comments were understated concerning, for example, the problematic that so many Mexicans had to find work in the U.S. since they could not make a living in their own country (Pacheco 1988).

[85] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%ADa_Elena_Velasco, (consulted on October 11, 2010).

In my view, most of Velasco's observations, outlined here, are not overtly critical and do not align themselves with a political cause, since they do not aim at bringing about change. Rather, Velasco seems to be pointing out social ills simply because she takes her audience seriously. This tendency is particularly evident in a statement to the press made as late as 1999, when she looks back her achievements saying "*Lo bonito es que con la India María he podido desahogar las cosas que nos incomodan a todos los mexicanos, sobre todo los campesinos*" (what is beautiful is that through *La India María* I have been able to bring up uncomfortable topics and vent the worry of all Mexicans, especially the farmers) (E. Alvarez 1999). The only opportunity Velasco took to fully exercise political stance was in the mid 1990s for her theater sketches declaring that, "*Ante de todo mi teatro es critica social*" (Before anything else, my theater plays are social criticism) (Olvera 1996). As mentioned earlier, over the years, Velasco's various remarks to the press indicate a gradual shift from an apolitical outlook to a clearer political stance. In the beginning of her career, she insists that *La India María* is mostly apolitical with some social criticism, then politically astute, while her critics accuse her of promoting what she pretends to fight against (e.g. racism).

A Star Defined by Ordinariness

As shown, media representations of Velasco do not differ greatly from her character. Velasco, like *La India María* is generally portrayed as an ordinary Mexican woman who repeatedly uncovers, by nature of her ordinariness, already existing and oppressive power structures. This similitude between the character and star's image is what film scholar Richard Dyer would call a 'perfect fit', wherein all aspects of a star's image are reflected in the traits of the character he/she impersonates.[86] Often perfect fits occur when scripts are developed and written expressly for a specific star (Dyer 2000b: 126). In this case however, the perfect fit applies reversely. For Velasco it is the character type that gives rise to the star image, so much that the media, with Velasco's participation, initially equates the two. Over time, her star image evolves and continues to develop independently to this day.

Thus in contrast to the usual process of star appropriation — in which viewers negotiate their difference to the star's image, as feminist scholar Jackie Stacey claims, in order to reinforce the star's otherness, and then imitate their behavior (Stacey 2000: 149) — Velasco's audience does not exercise its class-based appropriation based on their difference but, instead, on their similarity with her. Velasco's image is thereby established as a performer whose celebrity is constructed through discourses of ordinariness and closeness to the pueblo. In this way, Velasco differs from the great

[86] Dyer has thoroughly studied star phenomena under different aspects. Before many others and as early 1979, he has analyzed what Hollywood stars consist of, in terms of their production and how, and to what extent, their image is reflected in the characters they impersonate (Dyer 2000b: 124; 2000a: 121; 2004: 3ff).

female Mexican film stars of the Golden Age, such as María Felix or Dolores Del Rio.[87] Contrary to these two stars, Velasco never attracted fans beyond the Latino community. At the same time, she embodies the image of an independent woman who knows what she wants, pursues clear goals, and reaches them. These aspects of her public persona coincide with those of her character, who always triumphs heroically at the end of each film. Thereby Velasco gives her star image a rebellious touch inspired by and/or inspiring her character, since in her interviews and all *India María* films, existing social barriers are either overturned or ignored.

Indeed, the answers to my interviews confirm that some viewers identify the issue of social class both for *La India María* and through Velasco's closeness to the audience. These viewers see both character and star, together, as representatives of the fight for Mexico's underclass — an (anti)heroine who constantly tests the boundaries of power by questioning and denouncing entrenched hierarchic structures. The social implications of these identifications are clearly confirmed by viewers' descriptions of *La India María* like "*lucha contra la corrupción*" (she fights against corruption) and "*es la reina de los pobres*" (she is the queen of the poor). Identification practices between audiences, roles and stars are also relevant and worth noting, especially with regards to interviewees who enjoy fantasies of empowerment when viewing *India María* films. One way to understand the power of this pleasure could be in that those fantasies are especially attractive to audiences who cannot experience or enjoy them in everyday life (Stacey 2000: 149). Furthermore, few viewers actually put their fantasies into practice. Those who do actively appropriate them, always use the character image and not the star's, by tweeting, for example, with *India María* as pseudonym in order to advocate for workers' rights (see *India María* on Twitter).

An empowering reception is additionally supported by the viewing context, since the viewer's experience is not limited to their reception of characters, films and paratexts, such as posters, interviews and advertisements. The context of the screening and other relevant practices also significantly influence the reception process and give rise to manifold receptions of the films. *India María* films are watched either in the cinema or in front of the television, accompanied by many side activities including talking to other audience members.

Along with the conditions of a viewing context, the composition of the audience also plays an important role. Depending on whether the public consists mostly of women or men, migrants or middle-class viewers, the film's reception can change considerably. Many people interviewed for this study report that they often watch *India María* films on Sunday with their family, as a kind of ritual. Most of them indicate they had watched the films in movie theaters until the 1980s, and then at home on television, videotape,

[87] On the image of other Latino stars see Hershfield (2001), Perriam (2005) and Thornton (2010).

and/or later on DVD. Latinos living in the USA, in particular, claim they watch the same *India María* films several times and are familiar with their stories. This appropriation indicates a participation in 'replay culture', a term referring to a mode of reception that shifts the spectacle from the screen to the audience and where, in this case, viewers do not need to concentrate on the film but can discuss it among themselves instead (Klinger 2006: 154).

Interviewees reported that family and friends always cheer *La India María* on whenever she is in danger or being harassed by authorities such as the police. As part of my research, I have also watched *India María* films numerous times and with different people whether a housekeeper's family in Los Angeles, a group of field workers in Fresno, a Mexican market woman and her family, etc. In the process, I have observed that viewers often repeat jokes and dialogues and, at times, some even join in during songs.[88] Viewers clearly both sympathize with *La India María* and admire her bravery in confronting and standing up to power. Even though some people I interviewed are no longer clearly working-class, most of them identify as being socially disadvantaged, whether based on their income level or their status as migrants. In group-viewing situations, interviewees share a sense of solidarity with the character that, like themselves, is marked as oppressed.

Clearly viewing contexts specific to *India María* films — marked by conversations carried on during the screening — together with the films, character, and their paratexts trigger a reception in which viewers can enjoy seeing power structures being dismantled. Such a reception is further supported by Velasco's and her character's mediated image, stressing their ordinariness and proximity to her audience. It goes without saying that an empowering appropriation will not necessarily lead to viewers rebelling against these same power structures in real life. On the contrary, it has been argued that such fantasies actually prevent audiences from taking action since they experience them vicariously through the character instead.

[88] Of course, I am aware that my presence influenced the reception situation.

Ill. 73: The venue and viewing condition determine the reception of *India María* films. This picture was taken at the opening of the first *India María* film, TONTA TONTA, PERO NO TANTO in front of a cinema in Caracas, Venezuela in 1972, to prove that the film was a hit.

To sum up, Velasco's media image and public persona consists of an amalgamation of characteristics, interests and attitudes which tend to emphasize her ordinariness and align her with her mainly working-class audience. What's more, her comments on Mexican food and music contribute to a public discussion of national culture and identity, highlighting their importance (Gómez Vázquez 2004). All this, combined with her understated or overt social criticism and compassion for the plight of the common people, and in particular the Mexican *campesino,* seems to suggest a reception of her films that would foreground aspects of Mexicanness. However, similar to the findings mentioned earlier regarding gender and class, interviews that affirm such an assumption are determined mostly by distance, in this case only geographic, by interviewees who are displaced and residing outside of Mexico.

Diaspora and the Reception across Borders

India María films, television shows and theater sketches have resonated and proliferated widely outside Mexico among the Latino community in a diaspora spreading through the United States and further. These films were among the most popular at video rental stores in Latino neighborhoods in the U.S. (Arbelaez 2001: 642; Barrios 1989). When María Elena Velasco performed her comical routines live prior to screenings in Latino movie theaters, seats would quickly sell out. Over time, Velasco's films have undergone manifold receptions by the Latino community in 'exile.'

In this section, I outline how her films have been appropriated while foregrounding aspects of diaspora relevant to a displaced audience. More precisely, I discern four aspects of diasporic receptions of *India María* films: To begin with, the films presents apparently 'real' images of the border crossing experience which can be understood and implemented as guidelines for border crossings; Secondly, these images reinforce existing border myths; Third, spectators might experience the loss and longing for a 'homeland' as a responds to representations of Mexicanness; Finally, as I have observed first-hand, viewers re-enact scenes and stories, incorporating them into their own lives, and thereby contributing to their development beyond the cinema. The outlined aspects of diasporic experiences and possible appropriations of *India María* films together constitute a cultural 'picture' of Latinos in diaspora. Interestingly, the aspect of Mexicanness was not foregrounded by viewers living within Mexico but instead, these receptions were particularly clear when distanced geographically.

At the core of all diasporic receptions lies *La India María* who, marked indelibly by aspects of migration, stands for fundamental concerns defining the *India María* films. As described previously, the protagonist of all *India María* films represents an indigenous woman who migrates either to the city or abroad, to the United States, in order to make a living by selling merchandise or working as a servant. Her status as a migrant has subsequently shaped the numerous stories on migration and belong to the story formula, 'adventurous journey', guaranteeing a happy-ending. Only two *India María* films are concerned with (illegal) migration across national borders and, significantly, they where her two outstandingly successful films OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) and NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (1988). The theme of migration across national borders in her other films, television shows and theater plays, is subtly woven into the stories, as for instance, with the mention of migration policies such as the *bracero* program.[89]

[89] The *bracero* program consisted of a series of laws and political agreements between Mexico and the United States. It was introduced during World War II to regulate labor force exchange between the two countries and allowed Mexicans to work legally in the United States, mostly in agriculture. Consequently, over one hundred thousand laborers left Mexico (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 31). The *bracero* program ended

This is Real

It might seem peculiar that *India María* films are appropriated as references for serious claims about border crossing experiences, particularly since her comedies don't appear to go beyond simple entertainment. However, various people interviewed for this study strongly identify her characters and in particular depictions of the immigration story with their own personal experience and memory of border crossing. When asked about how migration is portrayed in Velasco's films, some of the interviewees claim, "*exactamente así me pasó*" (it's exactly what happened to me). It is interesting to note that Velasco wrote the script for NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ based on various anonymous migration anecdotes of which she had heard or was told directly by people with first-hand experience. This kind of inspiration might favor a choice like Velasco's to engage in what has been identified by French film theorist Roger Odin as a 'documentarizing' mode. As Odin has demonstrated, when the documentarizing mode of reading is implemented in a fictional narrative spectators nevertheless assume that claims are being made about the real world. Odin has also argued that spectators participate in the documentarizing mode when they categorize the narrator as 'real' and therefore partly responsible for the constructed discourse (Odin 1990a: 130).

In order to fully understand the impact of diasporic receptions it is crucial to discern how *India María* films can be read in a documentarizing mode. NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ patches together various scenes portraying a migrant, who tries to make a living in the United States. The central character, *La India María,* is established and described as an illegal migrant worker and her various labor experiences are carefully depicted. At first she works in a factory where she must carry heavy cases. One day, the *migra* (border patrol) busts into the factory and all migrants flee. *La India María* continues to tolerate difficult working conditions. Later in the film she is shown waitressing and washing the dishes at a Mexican restaurant in Los Angeles. But again, things go terribly wrong; modern kitchen utensils overwhelm her, the coffee maker explodes and, again, *La India María* ends up fleeing from the migration police. At yet another job, advertising meat for the American Company Kentucky Fried Chicken, she is disguised in an oversized hen costume. She ridiculously bounces up and down, in front of the restaurant, while a promotional (diegetic) voice-over announces 'the chicken's' crunchiness. A group of pedestrians stop, amused, staring and laughing at the hen. Numerous scenes much like this one depict *La India María* as cheap labor. Each work experience is increasingly degrading, making oppression a fundamental aspect of her character. Nevertheless she seems to stoically endure her submissive position, at least at first.

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in 1964 due to harsh criticism. Nevertheless, the term '*bracero'* is used to refer to migrant workers to this date.

Ill. 74 and Ill. 75: In NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ Velasco patches together various scene of *La India María's* experiencing labor conditions of undocumented workers.

Surprisingly, the depiction of food is yet another aspect of *India María* films that may lead to an audience reception determined by the documentarizing mode. Food is not merely a commodity that *India María* advertises in the scene described. Above all, it plays a key role in underlining the character's displacement. Velasco uses the character's disadvantage to further her point: *India María* knows only a few words in English, her line "coffee and donuts" are two of them and through repetition they become emblematic of her limitations. Each time the character is hungry and tries to order food, she is misunderstood and ends up eating sugary donuts accompanied by sweetened coffee. The absence of Mexican food and her limited diet become the focus at various moments of the film. With its repetition, it becomes a running gag. In these scenes, Velasco is playing with an experience many migrants can relate to and which, as I discovered through my interviews, they often perceive as 'real'.

In OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981), the other *India María* film based on migration across national borders, the act of border crossing is depicted extensively in numerous scenes. It begins with *La India María* trying to obtain a visa for the United States. At the U.S. embassy she is informed about the documents she has to provide in order to travel legally through the border to the United States. The list of the items, ranging from a passport to bank statements and a credit card, correspond exactly to the documents actually required of a Mexican at the U.S. border. The scene clearly alludes to increasingly strict migration laws enforced in the 1980s that made legal border crossing into the United States more difficult for Mexicans than before. Here the film clearly depicts the 'real' conditions thereby implementing a documentarizing mode. Later in the film, when *India María's* visa is declined, she decides to cross the border illegally.

Various attempts at border crossing are depicted in detail, from swimming across the river to latching on to the bottom of a truck. The story of the film, however, does not require that these scenes be depicted with such precision. Velasco's choice to go into

such detail is an important aspect of her storytelling and reveals her intentions, since it appropriates and potentially evokes a reception of a 'real' border crossing. According to Odin, the border crossing itself can be understood as the real enunciator, constructed as an 'image' by the spectator, and therefore also lends itself to the reception of the film into the real lives of viewers under a documentarizing mode. Though many film viewers already lived through this experience, others may use the film to inform their choice to migrate. Various levels of the filmic text can be categorized as reception based on 'real' border crossing experiences which when implemented with a documentarizing mode trigger receptions by the audience whether in identification and/or fantasy, through the guise of the 'real'.

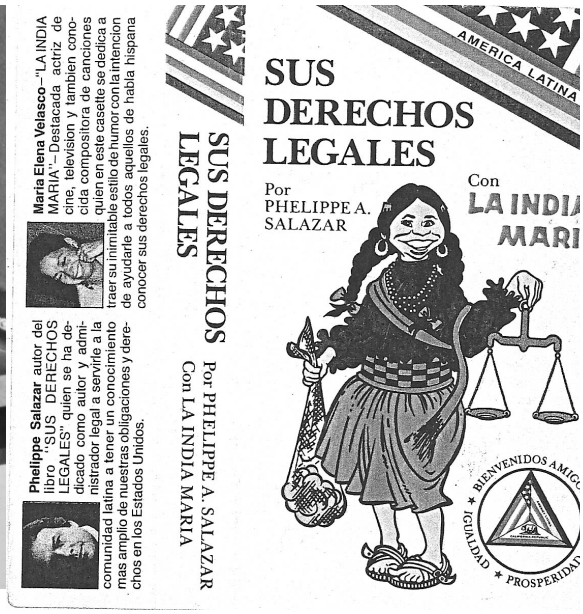
Ill. 76: the border crossings in OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) are depicted in detail, here she is crossing on the bottom of a truck.

Yet another paratext which I have left aside so far, might also have contributed to the reception stemming from a documentarizing mode. Besides her films, Velasco also produced an audio recording informing migrants about their legal rights in the United States. The purpose of this recording is revealed on the case of the tape.

> María Elena Velasco 'La India María' – Destacada actriz de cine, televisión y también conocida compositora de canciones quien en este casete se dedica a traer su inimitable estilo de humor con la intención de ayudarle a todos aquellos de habla hispana conocer sus derechos legales (from the cover of recording 'Sus derechos legales.')

María Elena Velasco '*La India María*' — Renown film and television actress, as well as famous song composer dedicates herself with this recording to bring to you her inimitable style of humor with the intention of informing all Spanish speakers about their legal rights (from the cover of recording 'Sus derechos legales').

Ill. 77: Pelippe A. Salazar and María Elena Velasco recording materials for the tape *sus derechos legales* (your legal rights).



Ill. 78: the recording *sus derechos legales* (your legal rights) might have favored a reception in the documentarizing mode.

The recording itself consists of a conversation between *India María* and a migration expert.[90] *La India María* portrays as a naïve migrant who voices all imaginable concern about migration. The expert answers her questions by informing her of her actual rights. For this recording, listeners are likely to identify with *La India María* who is voicing their concerns. Regardless of the somewhat humiliating characterization of *La India María*, Velasco signals to her viewers that she does in fact care for them, precisely because with this recording she provides 'real' help for migrants, on top of her 'light' comedies. Significantly, not only does Velasco make claims about the 'real' world and difficult conditions for Mexicans forced to migrate but, once again, she positions herself close to her viewers, as being 'of the people' (*del pueblo*).

Similarly, Velasco declares in various press interviews that, through her films, she tries to get a message across regarding the migration experience:

> Como en el caso de NI DE AQUÍ NI DE ALLÁ, tomando en cuenta el publico que ve mis películas, traté de hacerles entender cuáles son los problemas de los mexicanos que van a los Estados Unidos […] Había que estar en el pellejo de toda esta gente, para saber por qué se atrevan a jugarse la vida en una aventura, como lo es la de pasarse la frontera sin papeles (A. C. Hernández 1988a).

[90] Unfortunately I was not able to find a tape that was still working. The information used here is based on the information given to me by María Elena Velasco.

> As in the case of NI DE AQUÍ NI DE ALLÁ, taking into account the audiences of my films, I tried to make them aware of the problems Mexicans face when migrating to the United States […] You would have to be in their shoes to understand why they take the risk and play with their life in the adventure of crossing the border without papers (A. C. Hernández 1988a).

Here not only does Velasco show concern for the experience shared by her viewers and many Mexicans, she also uses her acting practice to describe what is necessary to understand it. Putting herself 'in their shoes' so to speak, she positions herself close to the migrant community. As with receptions regarding gender and empowerment mentioned earlier in this part, here again, Velasco is no exception. On the contrary, stars and characters such as Chagoyán's *Lola La Trailera* also deliberately construct an image based on sympathy for a diasporic audience. A relevant example of this can also be taken from the Almada brothers, Mario and Fernando, who have repeatedly signaled the fact that they are themselves — like the characters they portray — originally from rural Mexico and still adhere to a humble lifestyle.

Significantly, a parallel also exists between the Almada brothers and Velasco, evident through their common positing close to their audience. Mario claims to have frequently visited the border region where the stories in their films take place (in Iglesias 1991: 125). Also he clearly expresses his wishes to accomplish more than just entertain his audience in an interview, he declares his concern for his audience. Mario says, "*Espero que la gente pueda aprender sobre los riesgos que hay en tratar de cruzar la frontera"* (I hope that people will learn about the risks when trying to cross the border) (Pérez Jr. 2005: 7). Such a statement not only reflects the star's intention both to communicate the dangers of border crossing but also to convey an image of himself as someone who takes his audience seriously.

Various Mexican Formula Picture producers of other border adventure movies also see their films as a means to unravel the inhumane treatment of Mexican migrants. Producer David Agrasánchez, for instance, has stressed that his company hired a researcher to investigate the conditions of undocumented workers and their border-crossing experiences before film scripts were written (Iglesias 1991: 76). This, along with many other examples of Mexican Formula filmmakers, implementing practices that contribute to a documentarizing mode, indicates that *India María* films need to be understood within the broader framework of border cinema. The scholar Norma Iglesias in her research on the reception of border cinema, comes to similar conclusions, stating that for Mexicans who plan on crossing the border, these films are often a way of learning about the process of becoming an undocumented migrant (Iglesias 1999: 235).

Reinforcing Border Stories

Iglesias would also agree with my findings regarding migrants who have already lived the experience of displacement to whom the films present a means to revive memories of their 'adventures' (Iglesias 1999: 235). Significantly, some interviewees tended to

use *India María* films as a way to reinforce and glorify their own border-crossing stories. Two cornerstones principles define this reception: First, it serves as a reference frame for the recounting of numerous anecdotes revolving around the border; secondly, it is associated to the ritualized use of music.

Before sketching out the 'reinforcing' nature of diasporic reception, I will first recal issues relevant specifically to the Mexican-U.S. border along with existing scholarly debate on the topic. A significant scholarly influence for this study, to whom I have already made repeated reference, is Mexican scholar Iglesias. Although Iglesias has been a significant influence, her analysis of border films does not necessarily coincide with characteristics I define earlier for Mexican Formula Pictures. She offers, instead, a definition of border films that indicates the long tradition of the genre and provides, nonetheless, an extremely useful reference frame and wider context, where *India María* films treating migration and diaspora also belong. Iglesias divides border cinema into three historic periods. The first period ranges from 1938 to 1969 and is marked by thematic diversity. During this period the border is portrayed from different perspectives bringing up a variety of themes including migration, displacement and labor exchange (Iglesias 1991: 23ff.). In the second period, from 1970 to 1978, border cinema enjoys increasing popularity and cements traditions that would eventually determine the depiction of certain kinds of border stories and characters such as the coyote, the suffering migrant, or the immigration officer. Gradually, even the 'Chicano' character emerges as a popular type while the theme of migration becomes more and more important (Iglesias 1991: 43). Finally, between 1979 and 1989, during the third and most productive period Iglesias identifies stories, increasingly focused on drugs, crimes and other sensationalist aspects of the border.

The film LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO / THE RED CAR GANG (Ruben Galindo, MX, 1976) is one of the most known examples of the third period which, produced a little earlier, likely served as an example for subsequent productions. Much in the same way as many other border films, it depicts the border region as a dangerous zone in which drug lords dictate the rules, while migrants are exposed and vulnerable to extreme violence. Violence, in this case, functions as an excessive spectacle displaying deformed bodies and/or brutal action scenes in full length. The various excessive and obvious depictions of violence in the film clearly directs spectators' focus away from the narrative to the displayed attractions, influencing the question of reception significantly, since it likely prevents a reading determined, otherwise, by a documentarizing mode. Instead, the use of spectacle fosters a reception which glorifies the region's lawlessness.

Iglesias argues that during the third period of border films, the use of excessive violence, oversimplification, and repetition of stories — along with how the same actors were cast again and again in different border films — have contributed to the construction and affirmation of the border crossing experience, which through media

consumption has been converted into a 'myth' (1991: 67). Although I believe Iglesias' use of the term myth is, like the depictions she criticizes, somewhat exaggerated, I do agree that the films reaffirm a simplified notion of the border as a zone without laws and the experience of its crossing as a heroic act. For the purposes of this study, the two *India María* films, OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) and NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (1988) can be placed in the context of Iglesias' third period of border cinema and within her construction and identification of the border crossing myth.

A comparison of *India María's* films with LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO allows differences and parallels to be discerned. To begin with, *India María* films diverge considerably in their tonality; contrary to the typically violent border films of the period, Velasco's comedies are appropriate for the whole family, primarily aiming at entertaining viewers of all ages. However, the zone she passes through on her 'adventurous journey' does resemble the more common depiction of the area as a lawless zone, in which rules are not respected. The difference in Velasco's approach is particularly evident in an otherwise potentially disturbing scene from the film OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) when *India María* crosses through the borderlands and is picked up by a truck driver who harasses and tries to rape her. Such a scene seems to correspond to the tendency of the period, since the violation of women onscreen is a common way to represent the violence of the border region, defining it all the more, as a lawless space. The way Velasco stages the rape scene in OKEY, MISTER PANCHO, however, diverges significantly from the norm. Instead of glorifying the violence, Velasco's style and method of exaggeration focus on the ridiculous. While she presents a spectacular fight, special effects such as fast motion produce a bizarre distancing and, when the rapist rips off *La India María's* clothes, explicitly marked low camera angles reveal her underwear embellished with red hearts as she strikes back at her rapist with acrobatic slapstick moves and screams for help, as a Native American Indian comes to her rescue with his bow and arrows. Needless to say, enacting rape as a comic spectacle has a strongly alienating effect.

Ill. 79 and Ill. 80: In OKEY, MISTER PANCHO (1981) the depiction of a 'comic' rape scene plays with and breaches the notion of the border as a 'dangerous zone'.

The rape scene in OKEY, MISTER PANCHO clearly goes beyond reaffirming established clichés of the border region as a dangerous zone. It categorically questions normative depictions through their alteration. Interestingly, here, like with the question of gender receptions, Velasco's slapstick performance entirely reduces the character to its body. In this case, slapstick functions as a means to shift the notion of the dangerous border zone ad absurdum. The same holds true for other depictions of the border experience which leaves visible marks on the bodies of migrants crossing the zone. In LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO all four main protagonists are deformed and perforated with gunshots. In various *India María* films, Velasco's character repeatedly insists on showing, but never actually reveals to the camera, marks left on her body by violent migration experiences. Velasco's choice to point to scars that she never discloses is yet another way to question and transgress established notions and representations of the dangers of border zones. Instead of glorifying the sufferings, *La India María* constantly points them out, parodying a victim mentality, and signaling the drawbacks and negative implications they carry for daily life.

As Iglesias also points out, aside from the violence typical of the period, the use and exaggeration of stereotyped characters appear in the border action films. It is arguable, however whether the repetition of these characters (and actors) contributes to cement and secure their respective stereotypes, or if their obviousness leads, instead, to a critical questioning of what they represent. When *India María* encounters prostitutes, coyotes (human traffickers), or the *migra* (migration police) Velasco sets up a confrontation with schematically reduced types determined by their physical traits as well as their actions. Viewers might categorize these depictions as the affirmation of stereotype, while at the same time, they might be revealed as such. In LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO and many other border films, on the other hand, these character types are less ambivalent in their depiction and function as a means to reaffirm the anecdotes of the border region. In both cases, characters like these are all reduced to their physicality and a display of attractions which is symptomatic for border action films in general (Rohrer 2009c: 29, 30).

Accompanying the cemented character types and scenarios typical of third period of border films, the use of music, and specifically Mexican ballads or *corridos,* functions in favor of a reception that reaffirms Iglesias' observations on the border 'myth'. In fact, I am not aware of a single border action film without a *corrido.* On the contrary, their consistent and ritualized use indicates, rather, their importance. On this point, it is worthwhile to look at film scholar, María Herrera-Sobek, who has analyzed the various applications of Mexican ballads in border films. She notes that, not only is the ballad ubiquitous to border films, but often entire films are based on these *corridos*. In these

cases songs significantly shape the development of the storyline. In other cases, the music has the dramaturgical function of revealing parts of the story and/or framing them. *Corridos* also can be inserted as foreshadowing agents priming the audience for events to come. Sometimes, they even provide additional information on the film's plot. These extra-diegetic clues might be of political, economic, or psychological nature, providing details on characters or historical settings (Herrera–Sobek 1998: 230).[91]

Herrera-Sobeks' observations are also notable in Velasco's use of *corridos* and their importance in *India María* films is of no exception. In NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ the title ballad, *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither here nor there), both gives the title and establishes the main topic of the film. It is played twice as extra-diagetic sound at the beginning and the end of the film. The song refers to a common saying which stresses the sense of lack of cultural belonging and the in-between-ness experienced my many migrants. Velasco's *corrido* for this film is only one of many musical interpretations of the famous saying. While, for example, the Mexican-American Rapper Jae-P rhymes his version of *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* with lines about the homeland and his alienation from it, at the same time Chilean folk singer and performer Nutria NN reflects on his diasporic experience, presenting alternate interpretations of the border crossing experience.

The various styles and uses of the same saying points to the polysemy of popular culture and exemplifies the function of what Fiske has labeled "producerly" texts which lend themselves to manifold appropriations. Linked to a wider set of popular texts these Mexican ballads may be experienced at the foreground of the film and appropriated by viewers who tend towards a 'reinforcing' diasporic reception. This reception occurs particularly with films where *corridos* are performed by a band and displayed as spectacles — a film technique that encourages viewers to sing along. In OKEY, MISTER PANCHO, for instance, *India María* herself sings a *corrido* on a small stage and performs a dance. At the same time as the film's release, Velasco also launches a disc with various songs on it, most of them from the soundtrack of the film OKEY, MISTER PANCHO. The use of traditional tunes both in the film and its promotion draws attention away from the film's content, foregrounding the music instead, reverting to broader themes such as traditional food, migration, poverty or the nation. As music tends to trigger strong emotions, the songs are a means for Velasco to engage in an even closer relationship with her audience.

[91] In some cases, *corridos* have even spawned serial movies. The ballad *Camelia La Texana* (also by Los Tigres del Norte) for example inspired numerous border films based on the character *Camelia*, all of them with melodramatic elements: First CONTRABANDO Y TRAICIÓN / CONTRABAND AND TREACHERY (MX, 1976) was released. In the same year MATARON A CAMELIA / THEY HAVE KILLED CAMELIA THE TEXAN (1978) followed. The list of titles continues with, EMILIO VARELA VS. CAMELIA LA TEXANA (MX, 1980) and many more. The resemblance of the films' titles is eye-catching and suggests that only slight story variations were made. In fact, all *Camelia La Texana* serial movies are almost identical.

Even though up until now, I have refrained from going into detail about the reception context of *India María* films which, strongly influences the films' reception, it is highly relevant to Herrera-Sobek's arguments concerning the importance and impact of music, not only in how it contributes to the overall trend, but in particular the use of the Mexican ballad both on and off screen. As with its resonances within the film (diegetic or extra-diagetic), the Mexican ballad is also an inextricable aspect of the films' viewing context. Even when Velasco was not present at screening to perform some songs herself, hiring a live band and singer to play *corridos* before the screening became common practice for Latino theaters in the United Sates. Numerous exhibitors also organized singing contests between screenings. Such activities clearly indicate the active engagement of Velasco's audience and the audience of Mexican Formula Picutres, more generally.

Through my interviews I discovered that not only do some viewers sing along to popular songs which they often know by heart, but many of them also comment on their personal border crossing experiences with others whether at home, in front of the TV, or at a theater screening. Examples like these of active audience engagement across viewing contexts can again be framed within Kessler's *dispositif* of cinema of attraction, for which spectacles are displayed on-screen as well as in the exhibition venue (Kessler 2006:59). From this perspective, the film's very function is determined differently from normative cinema — if viewers are already familiar with the story of the films, they can concentrate on other activities such as singing along, discussing their own experience and sharing stories with other audience members. When this happens, viewer appropriations seem to contribute to a replay culture, wherein attention shifts away from the screen to the viewing context.

Regardless of the importance of music to the definition of Velasco's films and their reception context, it must be acknowledged that music has been a key element in Mexican cinema long before the emergence of Mexican Formula Pictures. During the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, for instance, monthly magazines such as *La novela cine-gráfica* aimed at familiarizing the public with the stories through the songs and lyrics of an upcoming film (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 40; anonymous 1947). These magazines were distributed prior to a film's release and when it premiered, people already knew the lyrics of the songs as well as parts of the dialog even before entering the theater. Although I am not aware of such magazines published to promote Mexican Formula Pictures, this practices has surely shaped the way viewers and theatre managers approached the films.

India María films like border films contribute to the reception of these films, focusing on aspects of the border myth through their lively viewing context and the use of traditional music. The depiction of the border as a dangerous zone however slightly

differs; Velasco plays with stereotypical representations, at times, revealing the construction of the myth, whereas many films, belonging to Iglesias's third period of border cinema, tend to cement or even glorify existing border stories.

Remembering Mexico

For the expatriated Mexican community in the U.S. the collective viewing of *India María* films whether at movie theaters or in front of the small screen together with family, friends and other migrants has been a way to keep a link to the homeland and strengthen ties within the Latino community abroad. As observed, popular tunes sufficed as triggers for a reception that supports this process. A few migrants who I interviewed say they enjoy singing along to film's music, particularly in their native language. One person even asserts that the films did not matter much, for him the popular songs were more important. Significantly, the film ballads and songs reminded many interviewees of Mexico. Surprisingly, a viewer reception stressing the homeland was not restricted to those *India María* films adhering to the formula of the 'adventurous journey', but include all of Velasco's films which contain songs and depict scenes foregrounding national characteristics, or Mexicanness.

A common way that Mexican films have stressed national aspects is through references to Mexico's past, mainly by glorifying the accomplishment of the Indian ancestors — the Mayans and Aztecs. While in the films of Mexico's Golden Age the celebration of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past was mainly accomplished through the staging of stories with noble Indians as protagonists, *India María* films function quite differently. In numerous films, among them EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO and LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL the protagonist, *La India María*, makes a living by selling duplicates of archeological pieces to '*gringos'* (a derogatory but widely used term for Americans). She sells artifacts of the past, commodities that have come into demand in international markets. Instead of glorifying their past Velasco's films seem to confront spectators with a critical examination of Mexico's relationship with its history. An example illustrating my claim can be found in EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO where the main story develops around an original artifact that gets lost after being mixed up with one of its duplicates, fabricated by *La India María,* and her grandfather. The fact that the items being sold are false doubles the parody and puts their value further into question.

An archeologist figures prominently in the film. He stands as a symbol for Mexico's national consciousness, and repeatedly stresses that Mexicans must acknowledge and cherish their national heritage. His scripted lines are both didactic and aim at reassuring Mexico of the country's richness. His part is to remember Mexicans to be proud of their country and appreciate its cultural heritage, instead of selling it out to foreigners. This character clearly alludes to the concept of Mexicanness aimed at fostering national unity.

The circular narration of the 'adventurous journey' in which the protagonist always returns (or indicates an eventual return) to his or her town of origin, suggests a sense of nostalgia for the home(land), whether that be Mexico, after crossing into the United States or, for the city dweller, the Mexican countryside. Concurrently, and in keeping with the 'perfect fit' between media persona and character, Velasco has repeatedly underlined that she is proud to be Mexican and has heavily stressed her national pride to journalists and critics, including her interviews, pointing to the need to preserve *lo mexicano* (Mexicanness) (Rohrer 2008, 2009b). In another interview published in the newspaper *Universal* she comments for instance:

> …a veces a los campesinos no se les da el lugar que merecen y tienen derecho a vivir dignamente como mexicanos, porque ser de este país es algo muy grande: yo me siento orgullosa y feliz de serlo (Chiquet 1996).
>
> …Sometimes Mexican farmers are not treated with the respect they deserve, they have the right to a life in dignity, as Mexicans, because belonging to this country is something wonderful, I am proud and happy to be Mexican (Chiquet 1996).

Her statement clearly aspires to accent her national pride. At the same time, Velasco's overt condemnation of the conditions under which many Mexicans farmers live, is a way to position herself closer to her viewers, many of which have left Mexico precisely because of the difficult economic situation. Mexican Formula Pictures exhibitors and producers took on a similar stance. They argued that the cinema was a way for Mexicans living in the United States to keep a link to their homeland. The producer Ruben Galindo Jr., for instance, comments on the function of these films explaining how, in terms of national identity, their reception from abroad operates differently than it does within Mexico's borders.

> ¿En México pueden no sentir que están perdiendo México porque al fin y al cabo están ahí, en su país, pero los que estamos fuera donde el cine es una de nuestras vías de contacto con México, con nuestras raíces qué vamos hacer?
>
> In México people don't realize that they are getting out of touch Mexico because they are still there, in their country, for us, however, we are away from home and films remain one of the last links to Mexico, to our roots. What are we supposed to do?

In answer to his question of how to deal with the absence of Mexican culture in the United States, some exhibitors simply named their theaters after patriotic heroes, regions, or mountains. Theaters named Zapata (a famous revolutionary), Popocatépetl (Mexico's most famous volcano) or Maya (an indigenous group) clearly allude to Mexico's history unique geography (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 11). The names of theater venues contribute to the trend of bringing the Mexican nation into the foreground.

Together with a viewing context specific to expatriated Mexicans, *India María* films supported by Velasco's image in the media, become links with the past and vehicles whereby a homeland can be remembered. This reception is not unique to *India María* films or even Mexican Formula Pictures, however, and can be observed through a wide range of Mexican films and music. The language and national specificity of cultural

products, be they sound or image, are what binds audiences to their sense of a homeland. The film historian and son of a prolific Mexican Formula Picture producer Rogelio Agrasánchez has posed a similar argument in his study of films from Mexican Golden Age of Cinema, pointing out that people experience stronger patriotic feelings when displaced simply because they constantly missed their national customs and habits (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 8). Iglesias goes further to suggests that border films, in particular, ease the feeling of loss of the homeland and strengthen the individual understanding of national belonging (Iglesias 2003: 235). She concurs with film scholar Hamid Nacify's understanding of diaspora, in which nostalgia for a homeland restores a sense of community, often idealizing the lost home. Diaspora also maintains a sense of difference over a long period of time, although at the same time hybrid forms of culture emerge (Naficy 2001: 13–14). Clearly this diasporic reception foregrounds the nation and is key to border film, and Velasco's films are no exception.

Proud to be a Latino

Finally, I have frequently observed a diasporic appropriation among Latinos in the United States, which stress aspects of in-between-ness, cultural hybridity, and ultimately feelings of pride, this time slightly differing from the nostalgic receptions noted above. The film NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ and its manifold receptions and appropriations serve perfectly to support this claim. Not only has the film had a strong impact and has circulated widely in Mexico, but in particularly among migrants in the United States. As described previously, the film depicts *La India María* though her various experiences as an undocumented Mexican laborer in the United States. Objects, clearly marked as American, are used as props in the film and function in contrast to *La India María*'s Mexicanness, to emphasize the character's displacement and in-between-ness. At the end of the film, she returns to Mexico wearing flashy tennis shoes, carrying a bag imprinted with "I love Los Angeles" in one hand, and a radio in the other — all objects indicate their origin and her arrival from the 'rich' North. The character's ability to acquire these objects is symptomatic of hybridization — part of a process of adaptation characteristic of the experience of Latinos in the United States. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, in NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ *La India María* only eats donuts and drinks coffee, simply because she doesn't know the English words for other dishes. The line "coffee and donuts" pronounced with a heavy Spanish accent has, over the years, become a catch phrase implemented by Latinos in Los Angeles (and possibly in other parts of the United States) to express their inability to solicit food or other basic services. It also connotes their incapability to speak proper English.[92] Used by Latinos themselves, the phrase underlines their awareness of being different from the American majority. Nevertheless, it is not degrading; on the contrary, similar to *La India María*'s

[92] I have coincidently come across the phrase when visiting a friend's house in one of Los Angeles' Latino neighborhoods. Subsequently, I began to inquire about its origin more thoroughly and many interviewees confirmed to know and sometimes use the phrase even though not all of them have actually seen the film NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ.

comic style, it should be understood as a joke — a self-declaration that construct identity through difference.

Much in the same way, paratexts for NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ, and namely, posters, contain cues stressing aspects of in-between-ness and difference.

Ill. 81: The lobby card for the film NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (1988) alludes to aspects of in-between-ness and cultural hybridity.

This poster is part of a series of five posters printed for the film. While the frame with the cartoon scenes remains the same for the whole series, each poster contains different stills placed on the side. In the cartoon both 'Uncle Sam', icon of the United States, and a Mexican revolutionary are trying to pull *La India María* to their side of the border, drawn as a thin white line. For the poster above, the first still shows *La India María* sitting in a donut shop eating the 'new' food. In the next still (below the first), she is the center of a tumult in a Mexican restaurant. The depiction of *La India María* torn between cultures, stresses her displacement and subsequent in-between-ness.

Statements by interviewees such as "I am both Mexican and American" affirm the notion of hybridity wherein the experience of in-between-ness is not necessarily perceived as negative. On the contrary, such statements lead to an understanding of hybrid identities marked by multiculturalism. This hypothesis is supported by examples from the Internet. Some YouTube users overtly identify themselves as fans of *La India*

María and upload movies of the actress, so that they become widely accessible across national borders. The comments posted by yet other users, reflect their identity as proud Latinos. They appropriate Velasco's films according to their own needs by commenting on them, an exchange that describes a shared experience, written in Spanish permeated with English terms — a 'language' commonly referred to as 'Spanglish'.

Most clips uploaded are commented on vividly. The dialogue below is comprised of posts that respond to a clip (see Ill. 82) of the final scene from NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ.


que triste q le pusieron las esposas. y pensar q solo queremos trabajar,porq si yo tambien soy ilegal.
abner7949 vor 2 Wochen

Que mal escriben aqui!!

divabella22 vor 2 Monaten

Thanks for posting,I enjoyed watching the movie.
62muki vor 4 Monaten

Es usted deportista?no,soy diportada jajaja rifado XD
habib9411 vor 8 Monaten

muchisisisisimas greacias por la peli ¡¡¡¡¡me encanto muchas gracias por tu aporttacion¡¡¡ como diria la india maria "que dios te lo pague" :)
Migueloo25 vor 1 Jahr

ESTAN BIEN CHIDO SUS TENIS, LE CONBINA CON SU ROPA
omarzamora10001 vor 1 Jahr

@6stringslinger Es la actriz
Leslyeksw vor 1 Jahr

@6stringslinger
Se dice Actriz, compañero.
MexicannMusic vor 1 Jahr

COMO SE LLAMA LA CANCION QUE SALE AL FINAL????
psicodelicocpv89 vor 1 Jahr

Esta gupa la actuora.
6stringslinger vor 1 Jahr

Ill. 82: Screenshot of a discussion triggered by a clip from NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ posted on YouTube (October 2010).

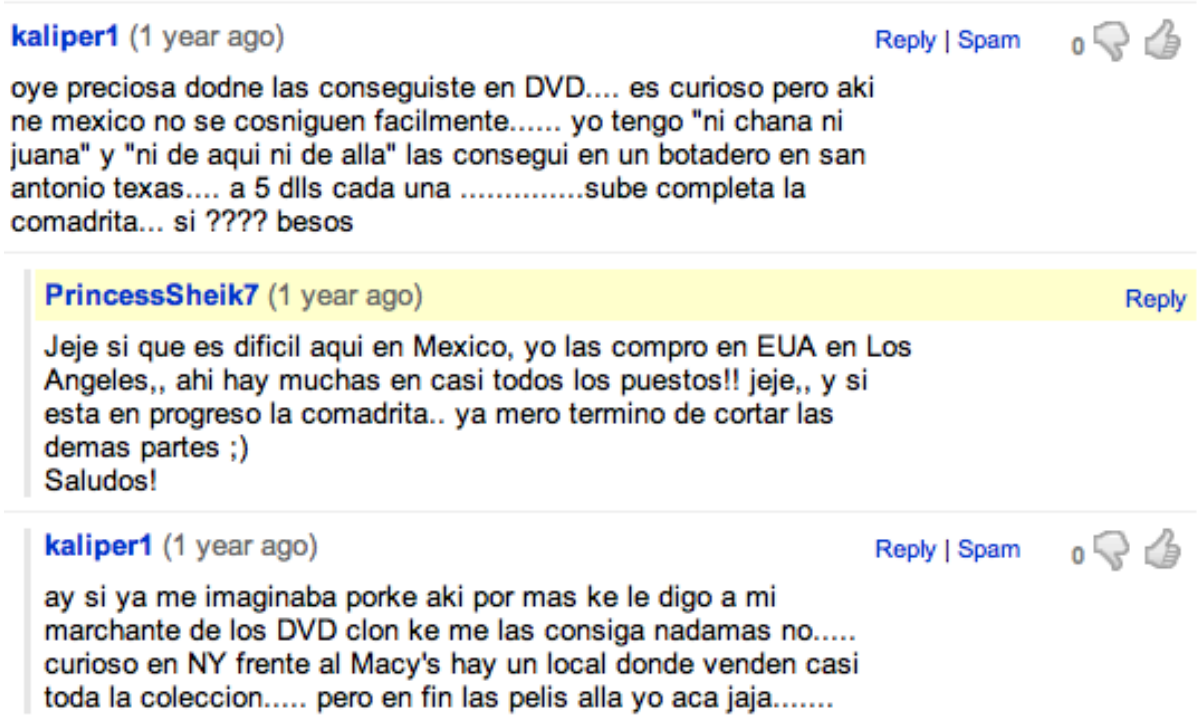
Many different receptions are evident in this single comment thread. While user *omarzamora10001* comments directly on the scene, expressing his adoration for the newly acquired tennis shoes in combination with the traditional outfit, user *abner7949*

identifies with the character because of her status as an undocumented worker. Yet another user wants to know the title of the final song. Lastly, there are people complaining about the many mistakes in use of language. This could be seen as a way to admit experienced in-between-ness and the failure to dominate neither Spanish nor English. Also, as it occurs quite frequently, there is a comment, this time in English, expressing appreciation for the user that shared the films online.

In a different comment thread, a user named *metono* thanks user *PrincessSheik7* for uploading *India María* film clips and underlines her admiration for the character. Her comment also provides a good example of how a mixture between English and Spanish occurs. Not only does she use the English word 'please' at the end to request more clips, but she spells it phonetically, to emphasize her Spanish accent. Yet another user who writes in English and identities himself on his channel as a Latino living in San Diego, expresses his admiration for the character.

Ill. 83: Screenshot of a discussion triggered by a clip (October 2010).

Viewers also request information on this forum, regarding the accessibility of the films asking where the DVDs are sold. According to these user comments, *India María* films are more widely distributed within the United States then in Mexico.



Ill. 84: Screenshot of a discussion triggered by a clip (October 2010).

The last comment by *Kaliper1* insightfully jokes about how the films themselves migrated, alluding to a reversed nostalgia wherein Mexico also misses its expatriated Latinos.

These, and so many other comments on uploaded clips of Velasco's films, communicate the underlying desire for Mexican's to express cultural belonging to the Latino community across borders, even by simply acknowledging or declaring oneself a fan of *La India María*. Clearly, seeing the clips on YouTube might trigger feelings of pride, opening the way to an understanding of the phenomenon akin to Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' (2006). Anderson uses the concept of the 'imagined community' to explain the mechanism of belonging (Anderson 2006). Accordingly, an 'imagined community' is a set of people who share an image of communion even though they have never met (Anderson 2006: 6).[93] The concept of the 'imagined community' always has to be applied and situated clearly within a defined historical and cultural context. The examples dialogue threads given above, clearly show how a cultural text *per se* only becomes meaningful when put into context. Even though initially the Mexican press either criticized or ignored a majority of *India María* films, receptions and appropriations reflecting themes in-between-ness that ultimately trigger

[93] Hence, nations are invented; they are imagined and do not naturally exist. Additionally, "it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 2006: 7). The 'imagined community' is thus constructed in cultural texts such as books or newspapers, through their distribution, consumption and finally appropriation (Anderson 2006: 27ff).

Latino pride emerge through YouTube and the Internet nearly twenty years after the films' first releases.

The possibility of commenting on individual scenes (cut short because of the limitations prescribed by YouTube) functions similarly to the replay function of home viewing, and strengthens the 'imagined community', a set of people, who have never met, but share a common notion of communion (Anderson 2006: 6). Furthermore, through active participation, incorporation and transformation, members of the community become producers of popular culture who actively renegotiate cultural meaning. Like with most Internet forums, the notion of community itself is stressed and, in this case, users contribute — through a somewhat oral language structure — to transforming Velasco's films into objects of Latino identity.

At times, the way viewers can appropriate *India María* films — foregrounding aspects of Latino identity — goes well beyond just commenting. Short bits or phrases taken from *India María* films are distributed as multi-media clips, as messages or ring-tones on cell phones, used mainly as jokes aiming to cheer up friends. Some online viewers even film themselves doing short sketches and reenact scenes from the films, which they upload onto YouTube, where they can then be seen and discussed by others. An extreme example of such a pride appropriation is a live drag show in San Diego, California featuring a transvestite disguised as *India María* who attracts audiences of all ages.[94]

Ill. 85 and Ill. 86: In the United States there is even a drag show with a performer disguised as *La India María*.

Similar practices can be observed with other Mexican Formula Pictures and stars, especially border action films such as LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO. Scenes from these movies have also been re-enacted repeatedly, slideshows have been produced and

[94] See http://www.frictionmagazine.com/artful/artists/rosemarie_print.html (10.3.2012)

corridos covered by different bands and turned into music clips. Examples of this material can be found online in abundance.

To conclude, in a diasporic reception of the *India María* films, as outlined, aspects of migration are stressed throughout the entire filmic practice; in the films, paratext, distribution, and viewing context, as well as by the director, María Elena Velasco, who contributes additionally with her informative recording for migrants. It goes without saying that a diasporic audience is naturally affected by the depiction of migration in *India María* films. Clearly, interviews with Latinos abroad tend to emphasize aspects of their own migration experience. However, to fully understand the complexities of diaspora, I must reiterate here that all four possible appropriations characteristic of diasporic receptions outlined earlier: supposedly 'real' (1), 'reinforcing the border myth' (2), foregrounding the nation (3), and Latino pride (4)). Though distinct, these for appropriations should not be understood as pure and isolated from each other. All four are porous, hybrid and, most importantly, always shifting.

Indeed, as I observed through my interviews, the films' reception shifted according to viewers' individual needs; stressing, at times, the supposedly real aspects of the border crossing experience, while focusing on aspects of national pride at a later point. Furthermore, viewers shift their attention when judging the films retrospectively, but also within a single screening. The shifts and slippages between receptions are so frequent that, under certain circumstance, it becomes impossible to determine which was occurring when. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect some tendencies dividing receptions according to viewer categories. Notably, people who recently emigrated from Mexico tend to appropriate films under the documentarizing regime and/or use them to remember their homeland, while Latinos living in the United States for a while or who grew up there, favor appropriations that elicit pride, reinforce identity and produce a sense of community.

Critical Reception

Featured prominently on the cover of the Mexican magazine *Super Musical* the headline succinctly sums up the main issue of the critical reception of *India María*: "Intellectuals don't like me, but the people do!" (1989a). *India María* films, like most Mexican Formula Pictures have repeatedly been the subject of harsh criticism denounced as 'bad quality' and accused as having a negative influence on spectators, deteriorating their taste. At the time of the release of most Mexican Formula Pictures in the 1970s and 1980s, many Mexican intellectuals and film critics insisted on the omnipotence of television and cinema and their power over the passive viewer/audience. They often saw their main role as critics in revealing or disclosing mechanisms of influence and warning audiences of negative influences from the media (Ricalde Castro 2004a: 198). Some of the people interviewed still strongly condemned the *India María* films. It is not easy to define, however, exactly which factors determine that they be perceived in such a negative light.

In the following paragraphs, I identify and sketch out a mechanism involved in the construction of the discourse defined by 'low quality/bad taste' attributed to *India María* films, and Mexican Formula Pictures more generally. Before I go further into describing this mechanism for Velasco's films, I will briefly highlight its most important theoretical implications. First of all, the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse is always already embedded within existing power constellations (Shohat and Stam 1994: 341). Secondly, the way films are talked about is always related to a specific historic moment (Hall 2001: 72). Third, specific subjects embody and personify the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse and have a varying degree of authority within the field of power (Hall 2001: 73, 74).

Generally film critics and intellectuals possess a discursive authority due to their knowledge of film culture, while spectators posses little or no authority. In addition, the films themselves carry a degree of symbolic capital resulting from and defined by mechanisms at work in the field of power (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993: 9). In the case of *India María* films the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse and subsequent critical reception of the films are constituted by different determinations and actants including Velasco, as a producer, filmmaker and actress as well as film critics and intellectuals, but also viewers. These actants stress different factors ranging from the depiction of the ethnicity of the character, to the aesthetics of the films and performance style, all of which contributed to the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse.

Most importantly, the critical reception of many *India María* films falls back on the film style itself. Critics have repeatedly pointed to perceived flaws such as the bland repetition of stories, simplistic themes and 'poor' aesthetics as well as unskillful directing and 'wooden' performances — particularly the gags (Ayala Blanco 1989;

1994: 415; Barriga Chavez 1988b, 1988a, 1991, 1993; R. Galindo 1990). Though critics have mostly argued that *India María* films fail to provide the quality set by Hollywood norms, Velasco's films have also been considered 'bad' for Mexican standards. Film critic Ezequiel Barriga Chávez (1988a), quoted harshly condemns NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ (1988) at the time of its release taking the film as a prime example of the 'crisis' of Mexican cinema:

> Basta con una cinta como ésta para darnos cuenta del estado de cosas a que ha llegado esta industria que en otros tiempos fue una de las principales de este país, amén de ser una importante generadora de divisas. Hoy el cine se hace a partir de los argumentos más simplones con unas adaptaciones pésimas, un supuesto humor completamente envejecido, personajes que rayan en la caricatura y una realización anodina, incapaz de lograr una sola toma rescatable.
>
> A film like this one speaks for itself and makes us realize how bad things have gotten in this industry, which before has been among the strongest of the country, generating lucrative profits. Today, films are made with the most simplistic scripts, based on horrible adaptations, using a humor totally out of date, cliché characters, horribly filmed, not getting a single shot right.

At the end of his article he takes his critique to a more emotional level by commenting that one never knows at what point in the film one should laugh or cry, but from sadness about the deep fall of Mexican cinema (Barriga Chavez 1988a).

In fact, *India María* films are undeniably marked by what are commonly considered by film experts as deficiencies. The stories are straightforward adhering to one of the outlined story formulas, and are then repeated in numerous other films. The linear plots are frequently interrupted by excessive and obvious slapstick routines or by other spectacles. Cinematography and montage are mostly used pragmatically: Camera movements are kept to a minimum with the main goal of framing characters. Many films contain continuity-errors. Colors are rather bland and at times it seems as if the process of color grading has simply been skipped. Hence, within established norms determined by mainstream Hollywood cinema or even, at times, classical Mexican melodramas, *India María* films bear signs that unmistakably mark them as 'low quality'.

According to Bourdieu's definitions, it can be said that *India María* films possess little, if any, cultural value leading to their low symbolic capital and resulting in the films' failure to accumulate prestige and/or recognition within what he defines the "field of cultural production".[95] Nevertheless Velasco's films have acquired a considerable

[95] The economy within the field of culture is based on the value of a cultural work, determined by *symbolic* and *cultural* capital (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993: 9). *Symbolic* capital here refers to the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honor in the dialectic of knowledge and recognition. *Cultural* capital, on the other hand, describes forms of knowledge, dispositions and competences within consumers of cultural goods. Additionally, the field culture is structured by what Bourdieu presents as opposites: *restricted* production and *large-scale* production. More precisely, large-scale production is constituted by

amount of economic capital due to their wide distribution and success with the audience as large-scale productions. This might even have encouraged critics in their condemnation of her films, since success with audiences is often considered suspicious (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993: 50). Whatever the cause, there has been a unilateral agreement that *India María* films, and most Mexican Formula Pictures, posses little symbolic value, to justify such a lack of interest by archives so as to rarely collect or preserve Velasco's work.[96]

Velasco too, as an actant in her own right, further contributes to the 'low quality' discourse by commenting on the state of the Mexican film industry (Garay 1994; A. C. Hernández 1988a). She commonly insists that the film industry is a business, aiming to generate revenues and not art:

> El cine es una industria. Con esto quiero decir que si se filma una cinta, lo menos que se puede esperar es recuperar lo que se invirtió (Velasco in A. C. Hernández 1988a).
>
> Film is an industry. This means that when you make a movie, the least to expect is that it recoups its investments (Velasco in A. C. Hernández 1988a).

Velasco is not alone in her blatant commitment to large-scale production. Many producers of Mexican Formula Pictures overtly declared that they made films to make profits. Among them, Rogelio Agrasánchez, a prolific producer who specifically made films to exploit the Los Angeles audience, admitted he was after 'sure-fire instant hits' — not art films. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Agrasánchez uses a derogatory term referring to Mexican illegals in the United States to emphatically begin a list of what is necessary for his films' success, "*wetbacks, violencia, mucha violencia*" (wetback, violence, a lot of violence) (Goldin/Cooper 1986). Similarly, the producer and director of the *Lola La Trailera* films, Rolando Fernández, portrays himself in an interview as a businessman:

> Nosotros, mi grupo somos gente de negocios, sabemos cuanto cuesta meterse al mercado, popularizar un nombre, conquistar al público (anonymous 1985a: 5).
>
> We are business people and know exactly what it takes to produce films, push talents, and enthuse the public (anonymous 1985a: 5).

It is likely that such clear commitments to large-scale production, and even Agrasánchez' provocative stance, adopted by various other actants within the industry during this period of Mexican cinema, contributed to the harsh critique they received. Certainly both groups of actants, critics and producers, function as two opposite poles, with producers blaming critics for fostering the 'bad quality' discourse and vise versa.[97]

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a higher level of economic capital and a lower level of symbolic capital (Blewitt 1993: 15), whereas restricted production accounts for a high level of symbolic capital and a lower level of economic capital.

[96] In the course of my research, I have discovered only a few private collectors or fans who kept her materials, while the producers themselves and the archives did not consider the materials worth filing.

[97] Within the Mexican industry, some producers became gradually worried about the harsh judgments by critics. It was suggested that the bad image of their films stemmed from the producers' wish to solely

Director Gilberto Martínez Solares, known for sequels such as LOS DÍAS DE LOS ALBAÑILES / DAYS OF THE BRICK LAYERS (MX, 1985–1990) or OK, MISTER PANCHO (1981) blames critics and film scholars for their patronizing stance on Mexican Formula Pictures. It is worth noting that he does not distinguish between scholars and film critics because in Mexico they mostly held double positions. He underlines their pivotal role, in valuing cultural products and even shows how their opinions are changeable.

> Por lo que siento que los críticos son muy solemnes y que están por lo menos 20 años atrás en los gustos del público, ya que consideran a la comedia como un género vulgar y ordinario. Así llegaron a calificar por ejemplo las comedias que hice con Tin Tan, pero después cambiaron de opinión. Hasta que García Riera y creo también Ayala Blanco empezaron a decir que tenía cierto valor y ya ve, ahora las películas con Tin Tan que dirigí son consideradas como clásicas y hasta como joyas del cine mexicano (Martínez Solares in Jiménez Patiño 1987: 16).

> I feel the critics are holier-than-thou and at least twenty years behind the taste of the audience. For a long time they considered comedy to be a vulgar and ordinary genre. That is for example how they categorized the comedies I made with Tin Tan, but later they changed their minds. Until García Riera and Ayala Blanco began to see some cultural value and there you go: now the films with Tin Tan which I directed are considered classics or even pearls of Mexican cinema (Martínez Solares in Jiménez Patiño 1987: 16).

Velasco, much like Martínez Solares, has made deliberate jabs back at the critics' corrosive judgments of her films. The headline "intellectuals don't like me, but the people do!" (1989a) attests to Velasco's strategy to pit the tastes of audiences and intellectuals against each. She is suggesting that it is impossible to please the critics and, simultaneously, be watched by a wide audience (Leal and Pérez 1997; Segoviano 1994). The quote also diminishes the influence that critics can have on a film's success. In yet another interview, Velasco takes her hypothesis a step further by turning the tables and accusing intellectuals and critics[98] for making art films, no one watches:

> Los intelectuales quieren hacer un cine que ellos consideran que es el CINE con mayúsculas, pero desgraciadamente a la gente no le gusta (Velasco in A. C. Hernández 1988a).

> Intellectuals want to make films that they consider art, but unfortunately people don't like these films (Velasco in A. C. Hernández 1988a). (Not a literal translation)

Mechanisms distinguishing the 'pueblo' (the people) from the intellectual elite were in fact quite common in Mexico up until the 1990s (Ricalde Castro 2006: 88). They go back to a deeply ingrained assumption that audiences are cultural dupes or passive masses. Further, the division into two groups, 'high' and 'low' art, was clearly a means to maintain power relations and foster feelings of superiority/inferiority through processes of difference. On the one hand, as Bourdieu has argued, 'high art' is

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make high profits. In January 1987, an edition of the industry journal *Camara* was dedicated to the situation of the industry, which became gradually known as the 'crisis' (Camara 1987a).

[98] The linking of critics and intellectuals is not coincidental, but needs to be contextualized within the *grupo nuevo cine,* a group of critics and filmmakers that was formed in the 1970s fostering films which brought Mexico's realities to the screens. Several film critics belonged to that group and also produced auteur films (see page 45).

legitimized since it possesses high symbolic capital and through its complexity becomes enjoyable only for elites (Bourdieu 1984: 486–88). *India María* films and Mexican Formula Pictures in general, on the other hand, are easily accessible, possess little symbolic value and are considered 'low art' — that is thought to harm the taste of spectators.

Besides the harsh critique of Velasco's work, her films like those of Isela Vega, have been widely overlooked and even deliberately ignored by leftist oriented newspapers such as *La Jornada* and *Unomásuno* or the magazine *Proceso*. Even when Velasco began directing her own films and generated a massive box office response, the newspapers simply ignored her (Ricalde Castro 2006: 88). The question remains how does the absence of attention in the press contribute to the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse? That is, how do journalists and film reviewers figure as actants? As French philosopher Michel Foucault insightfully points out in his discourse theory, if a topic is not written or talked about by a certain group, the absence still contributes to the discourse, in this case, it serves to confirm their low value (Foucault 1980: 194, 96).

At this point, it seems necessary to comment on the longevity of the *India María* films over forty years with particular attention to the way Velasco has handled the role both in terms of her character and star status. Velasco's acting has been criticized as stagnate because of her dedication to a single role throughout her entire career. This perspective is symptomatic of a mechanism that Bourdieu identifies within the field of cultural production, in which artists, here actors and actresses are required to prove their skills by playing various multifaceted roles, in order to acquire symbolic capital. Critics perceive each role as another challenge that, when successfully interpreted, ultimately leads to an increase in the actor's symbolic capital. Velasco, choses not to conform to this model and for many years, sticks firmly to the character of *La India María.* As a result, Velasco's status as performer does not to acquire symbolic capital, on the contrary, even though she becomes active in other fields, such as working on the scripts, directing and ultimately producing her own films, her dedication to a single character is still perceived as a trap, keeping her from progressing as an actress. Furthermore, her work as a filmmaker, although closer to the authority and status of the film apparatus, is consistently ignored by Velasco's critics. Significantly, Velasco herself agrees with the perception that her dedication to *La India María* has caused her to stagnate as an actress. Later on in her career, she repeatedly voices her wish to expand her role and impersonate other characters (anonymous 1987b; Chiquet 1996; Jiménez 2002; Notimex 1997; Ramírez 1987). The statement quoted below, from an interview in the early 1990s with the newspaper *El Sol Del Medio Día* exemplifies Velasco's adherence to the mechanisms at play determining a film actor's symbolic capital, in her case, projected entirely onto the audience.

> Me gustaría crear otro [personaje] completamente antagónico, por ejemplo una mujer de la vida galante o una narcotraficante, para demonstrar al público que tengo la capacidad de interpretar todo tipo de géneros (anonymous 1992b).
>
> I would like to impersonate another [character], totally opposite, as for instance a rich lady or a drug dealer, to prove to the audience that I am able to embody any kind of role (anonymous 1992b).

At the same time, Velasco was perfectly aware that her career success was entirely linked to the character, *La India María*. In the same year as the interview quoted above she remarks:

> Si acaso, continuo, haré algunas innovaciones (al personaje), pero ninguna manera desaparecerlo. Esto es como sí dijeran que Mario Moreno dejo der ser cómico como la ha sido toda su vida y se olvidara de Cantinflas. El público, no sólo de México, sino a nivel internacional lo recordará como Cantinflas y a mí, como La India María (Suarez Ojeda 1992).
>
> If I continue, I might amend some traits, but never abandon the character. It would be as if Mario Moreno would stop being a comedian, after having impersonated *Cantinflas* for all his life. Mexican as well as international audiences will always remember him as *Cantinflas*, and me as *La India María* (Suarez Ojeda 1992).

Velasco's insight, more than ten years later, when she finally impersonated a dance instructor in her son's film HUAPANGO (Iván Lipkies, MX, 2004) proved to be the most realistic, since the hoped for critical acclaim for stepping out into other roles was not granted. In interviews I conducted with her in 2008 and 2009 Velasco acknowledges that her career has been entirely marked by *La India María*. Two years later in an interview on the set of her latest film LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA (2012) she expresses her wish to "fully exploit the character one last time" (*Quiero explotar el personaje una última vez más*). Velasco's choice of words clearly emphasizes the economic value of the character, as opposed to the symbolic one. It reflects the fact that the character, *La India María,* had become the main income for herself and her two children. As mentioned earlier, the economic benefits Velasco garnered from 'exploiting' *La India María* became, in itself, a source of criticism.

Clearly both critics, on the one hand, and producers, on the other, strongly contribute to the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse. While producers position themselves within the field of large-scale production, stressing the success of their films with audiences, critics have insisted that these films lack quality. While critics claim discursive authority, viewers seem to have cared little about their critique. As the popularity of Velasco's films and Formula Pictures at the box office attests, viewers went to theaters and received the films according to their individual needs appropriating them in empowering ways that seem to contradict the judgment of critics and, for the most part, bolstering the position of producers in the ongoing debate.

As outlined previously, the ethnicity of the character as well as its reduction to certain typified traits have led to critical reception. At this point, I do not wish to reiterate anew

the details regarding this aspect of critical reception, except to remind the reader of how representations of ethnicity defining *La India María* and other characters in Velasco's films, are seen as negative stereotypes. Even though I have already looked at how these stereotypes, at times, transgress what they themselves represent, their criticism must be mentioned and taken seriously for strongly determining their overall critical reception.

Only few people I interviewed appropriated *India María* films in a critical light.[99] If they did so, they agreed with the film critics who condemn them for their 'low quality' and/or saw Velasco's depiction of *La India María* as a racist stereotype. In Mexico, the character and Velasco herself continue to have a controversial position. At various conferences in 2009 and 2010, Mexican scholars criticized me for doing research on *India María* films and Mexican Formula Pictures in general. Apparently, showing interest in Velasco's work alone was sufficient to attract this kind of critique. Even the newspaper, *La Jornada*, published a large article on me and my research concerned with the manifold receptions of *La India María*. The journalist was startled to note that *India María* films had become the object of international academic research (Márquez 2009). Among Latino scholars in the United States, however, my research was received with enthusiasm. In these scholarly circles my work was a promising contribution that responds to a significant gap in the existing body of criticism on the subject (Hudson 2009; Zimmermann 2009).

The outlined 'low quality/bad taste' discourse was predominantly shaped in the 1970s and 1980s and, as tends to happen, the way topics are talked about changes over time and especially through the circulation of Mexican Formula Pictures across borders. The discourse formation has gradually adjusted and positions have become less polarized. The most remarkable shift in perception of *India María* films was in the 1990s, with the release of Velasco's film, LAS DELICIAS DEL PODER (1999.). Critics praised the film for its overt critique of Mexico's political system in the midst of presidential campaign (Arredondo 1999; Aviña 1999; Betacourt 1999; Morales Valentín 1998). The film was not only praised for its mockery of mechanism of power, but positive judgment paired up with Velasco's statements to the press. In her interviews she had insisted on the need to have more women in politics. Velasco had previously voiced similar opinions to the press, however, it seems they were only taken note of in the 1990s. Clearly, the press was influenced by changes in discourse among feminist film scholars. During this period, her contribution as a filmmaker was gradually being re-evaluated. As previously noted, an invitation to the Women's Film Festival and conference in Tijuana, for instance, can be viewed as proof that Velasco finally gained critical acclaim (Fregoso and Iglesias 1998; M. Hernández 2007). Velasco, although flattered, refused this and similar invitations, because of her continuing suspicion *vis-à-vis* intellectuals, whom she

[99] Three interviewees were critical; one man who belonged to an indigenous movement group, the other worked as a hairdresser in Los Angeles, and the third was a scholar.

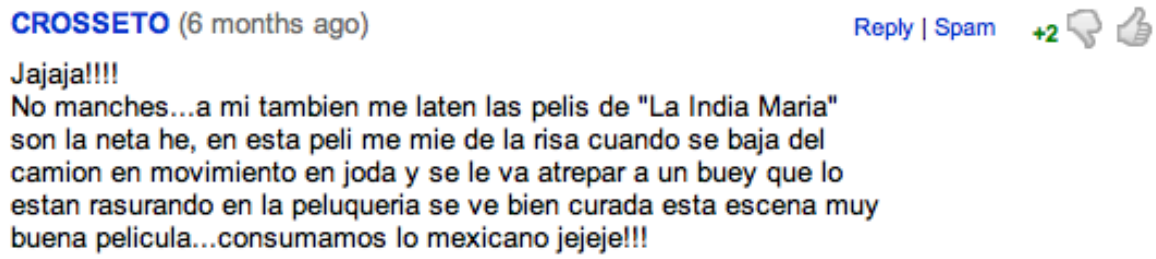
automatically aligns with film critics (Rohrer 2009b). She only accepted to be interviewed by me, a Swiss researcher, because I was not Mexican and did not work as a film critic, though it is not unlikely she hoped, I would contribute to a critical re-evaluation of her work.

Entertainment

In dealing with the multifaceted receptions and appropriations of Velasco's work from diasporic, gender, ethnicity, and finally critique, it can easily be forgotten that *India María* films, like other Mexican Formula Pictures, were primarily viewed and valued as entertainment. Many people I interviewed find *India María* films and Velasco's acting very funny. When asked what exactly was funny about her, they point to how she mocks politicians and people in power as well as her style of slapstick performance. Numerous comments on clips of her films on YouTube confirm Velasco's talent and the potential of her films to provoke laughter and entertain audiences. These online users often emphasize their appreciation of *India María* films with transliterated laughter (e.g. Jejeje, hihi).

An excellent example of how online users confirm the lasting entertaining quality of Velasco's films, well after their releases can be seen below. Here a user identified as *crosseto* comments in Spanish on a clip consisting of a scene of EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (1982). He points out the funniness Velasco's exaggerated gestures and slapstick performance when *India María* jumps out of a moving bus, fails to control her speed, stumbles into a barber shop, and finally ends up laying flat on a customer seated in a barber stool, with shaving cream on his face. Staggered, *La India María* spins on the stool, crushing the man under her.


Ill. 87 and Ill. 88: A scene from the film EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA (1982)



Ill. 89: Screenshot of a comment on the opening scene of EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA posted on YouTube (October 2010).

While *crosseto's* comment clearly expresses his enjoyment of Velasco's slapstick performance and physicality, he also praises the film and calls for the consumption of Mexican culture, poking fun at existing debates and emphasizing receptions of national pride, with his "*jejeje*" at the end being a clear appropriation of Velasco's own tactics.

La India María's potential to entertain becomes even more evident when assisting several screenings or watching the films with a group of other people. In these contexts, viewers laugh consistently throughout the films. During my research, surrounded by the enthusiasm of others, I couldn't help but crack up at certain moments. But what exactly is it that makes viewers laugh? As much as I persisted to find out what triggers their laughter, the explanations from interviewees never went beyond an enjoyment of slapstick performance and the character's resistance to people with power. Although this gives some indication, it doesn't seem to fully explain the phenomenon. Since viewers could not reveal precisely what triggers their laughter and feeling of being entertained, I must revert to theoretical findings and make speculations based on my own experience.

Although the question "what made *me* laugh there?" might be an interesting point of departure, an over-emphasis of my own perception might lead to a distorted generalization, particularly because humor is always rooted in a cultural context, in this case Mexican culture, to which I clearly do not belong. I am left with the problem of missing information and the prevailing wish to explain the most identifiable feature of *India María* films — their comic touch. For this reason, I must rely heavily on previous theoretical findings. Since I am increasingly aware of the dangers of this approach as well, I will combine my findings, with observations made at screenings, as well as an analysis of online comments. Although the result might not be fully satisfying, it provides a starting point to explain how *India María* films are constituted as entertainment.

A great deal of theoretical work on comedy has focused on what makes people laugh. For my purposes here, I wish to briefly outline one approach, which is relevant to Velasco's work and contributes to the subsequent discussions on *India María* films. Scholar Henri Bergson has developed an extensive theory tackling the complexity of laughter and the comic. Bergson claims that things closely related to being human can provoke the emotion of laughter. He argues, for instance, that while a landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly — it will never be laughable. However, people may laugh at an animal, yet only because they have detected some human attitude or expression in it (Bergson 1899: 4a). Bergson's observations on slapstick comedy are also particularly insightful. He notes that slapstick draws attention to the physical substance of the body, which is usually overlooked. Hence, the body's materiality is foregrounded, stressing its weight and resistance. This stands in contrast

to the body in its vitality as people usually think of it (Bergson 1899: 17b). Drawing attention to the materiality of the body and the limits of its vitality, a comic effect occurs, commonly resulting in laughter.

The question now turns to how Bergson's theories on laughter and the burlesque body relate to *India María* films. Although it is clear that they do, I wish to clarify first that not all laughter in *India María* films is provoked by slapstick performance. As mentioned earlier, the resistance against power structures and the transgression of social and gender roles play an equally important part in generating comic moments. I also want to suggest that the aesthetic quality of the films might be seen as comic due to their difference to common reference frames like mainstream cinema — a point to which I will return further on.

With regards to Bergson's theories, the foremost similarity is in how the characterization of *La India María* is largely defined by the focus on and exaggeration of her physicality. Her gestures are clumsy, she continuously stumbles, fights against objects in her daily routines, constantly producing gags. In all of the films she is established as a burlesque antihero from the very beginning. As her character maneuvers and/or is forced into various somewhat compromising situations, comic moments arise through a reduction of the image to the materiality of the body. The character (and actress) is constantly challenging her physical ability, underscoring the body's physicality by means of various cinematic tools including narrative, character definition and camera angle, to name a few.

The opening scene of EL QUE NO CORRE VUELA is an excellent example of how Velasco uses physicality and the body to create humor and establish the protagonist, from the very start. The character is introduced when *La India María* first appears on screen — she gets off a crowded bus that has just arrived in Mexico City from the countryside. Both the model of the bus and the people disembarking clearly are from a rural area. The passengers descend one after another instantly clearing the way for the following person. However, when *La India María* disembarks, she is overwhelmed and pauses for a moment at the exit. This results in a bottleneck of other passengers behind her who eventually presses forward and, finally, *La India María* is roughly pushed around. This establishing scene, and introduction to *La India María*, already foregrounds the character's physicality. Later in the story, she runs after a bus trying to jump onto the overcrowded stairs, but falls and flips. The next instant a taxi drives by, splashing her with dirty water. This opening scene, is not only comic because of *La India María's* struggles, but also because it contextualizes the character in a bustling excessive urban environment, visible as such through the character's distress. Inversely, spectators might also experience pleasure from how the excessiveness of the city stresses *La India María's* inability to deal with urban daily routines. At the same time, she is personified an underdog, comparable to Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, and provokes viewers to

identify the character's plight with struggles, they themselves experience. In all Velasco's films the physicality of the body is clearly contextualized and spectators are offered a narrative framework.

The transgression of gender roles and resulting empowering reception, touched upon earlier in this chapter, is yet another element that provokes laughter, this time however, the emphasis on the body plays itself out in significantly different ways. Throughout film history women have often been relegated to the position as objects of the male gaze. This form of representation began as far back as cinema of attraction at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century and has prevailed up to this date (Balides 1993; Guido 2006). These gendered and often sexualized representations of women on screen have generated a fair amount of research within the field of film studies (Balides 1993; Mulvey 2000, 2009; Podalsky 2000). Not only film scholars, but also audiences perceive ruptures and transgression of typical representations of women as uncommon. For this reason, they possess the potential to entertain viewers and trigger laughter. While there are many other slapstick stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Mario Alfonso Moreno Reyes, better known as *Cantinflas,* who use comedy and physicality to expose oppressive modes of representation, Velasco is unique in how she creates comic moments. Not only does she stage *La India María* in poses and through caricature actions that expose issues of class, like Chaplin's Tramp or Reyes' *Cantinflas*, but as noted earlier, she also diverts quite radically from common representation of her gender.

The image of dancing women is a good example of a common depiction of the sexualized female body as spectacle since the beginning of film history (Balides 1993: 20). Similarly, in the sexy movie category of Mexican Formula Pictures the display of dancing female bodies is a visual spectacle staged as an attraction, repeated in each film and which has by now become a convention. The character *La India María* reverts to (or possibly comments on) the convention by performing a dance routine in almost all of her films. Nonetheless, in EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983) Velasco performs a dance lasting over ten minutes, an exceptionally long scene even when compared to other Mexican Formula Pictures, in which she is entirely reduced to the materiality of her body. In this dance scene, she flees from a gangster in the pursuit and incidentally passes through one of Acapulco's discos. In order to escape her pursuer, she tries to cross the dance floor where she is invited to dance. Though reluctant at first, *La India María* starts moving her body, but soon makes excessive movements with all of her body parts; enthusiastically shaking her hips, rhythmically lifting her arms over her head, moving back and forth, rolling her shoulders. Her rapid exaggerated movements are underlined by the camera movements switching between high and low angles and recorded with a special lens multiplying her image and actions. *La India María* movements clearly allude to erotic dances exaggerated to an extreme and thereby unmasking their original purpose as a spectacle for the male gaze. Overtly stressing the

body as spectacle this scene unmasks it as such and turns it into a comic transgression of spectacle itself, provoking laughter through the inversion of conventions.

Ill. 90, Ill. 91, Ill. 92 and Ill. 93: In EL COYOTE EMPLUMADO (1983), *La India María* moves her body with exaggerated gestures. In this excessively long ten minutes dance sequence, special effects and lighting aim at maximizing the display of spectacle.

Film critics Ayala Blanco has harshly condemned Velasco for the suppression of erotic dimensions of the character in order to create laughter (Ayala Blanco 1989). I oppose to Blanco's critique arguing that comic moments are not always created through the desexualizing of the character or of its explicit exaggeration as with the scene described. On the contrary, humor is often created precisely through stressing the character's (unfulfilled) sexual desire. This becomes most evident in the film LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975) in which *India María* fancies a young good-looking fair skinned Mexican (*güero*). Unlike common images of a woman's sexual attraction, at every encounter between the two, her arousal manifests in the movements of her braids.

Ill. 94: In LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL (1975), *La India María's* braids rise, when fancying a handsome man.

With a mind of their own, *La India María's* braids rise uncontrollably and stand straight out to the side — accented by a quirking sound underlining the movement. Such a depiction of female sexual desire is surprisingly explicit and stands out in stark contrast to the usual representation of women as sexual objects. Comedy results from the inversion of gender roles, with the female character exposing her sexual desire, this time in a way similar to a man's. At the core of both opposing representations of the character's sexuality — one neutralized the other explicitly stressed — lay the pleasures (here comic) generated by human bodies on screen. Exposing the body as such is a determining feature of slapstick performances while similar pleasures are found in action, dance or erotic movies as well (Clayton 2007: 11). Although fascinations might be similar, receptions clearly differ.

Velasco further entertains her audiences by keeping to the clearly defined framework of the story formula allowing for comic moments to be created through the violating and overturning social and gender taboos. Story formulas play a crucial part in the process of reception. Spectators know exactly what to expect and they are assured through their previous viewing experiences that a happy end is guaranteed, even if serious and disturbing topics such as a migration or rape are represented. Spectators are familiar with the formula and expect that the character will always find a way to overcome existing problems. In LA COMADRITA (1978), for instance, *La India María* is introduced

as a defenseless indigenous girl from Mexico's countryside. Like in many other films, she is forced to move to the city in order to make a living. Throughout the film she learns to defend herself and in the process overthrows existing social roles. In one scene, she returns to her hometown and assists at a soccer game. The game proceeds in an orderly manner until a player is hurt and no substitute is available. *La India María* pushes the umpire to violate the dominant custom and accept a woman on the field. She offers herself as a player and once she is on the field, she breaks all the rules of the game; she grabs the ball with her hands, pushes the umpire, flips and roles, kicking the ball around.

Ill. 95: LA COMADRITA (1978) proffers pleasures playing with fantasies of resistance, here in a soccer game, breaking all existing rules.

In the end, her team wins the game and she is celebrated as its hero, being lifted to the shoulders of her teammates. The way Velasco uses her character to challenge and overturning existing conventions offers viewers a fantasy of resistance and carries entertaining value. Much in the same way the famous television character *El Chavo del Ocho*, a satire of society offering a fantasy of economic and cultural underdevelopment, embraces a notion of anti-progress and thereby entertains viewers (Nasser 2008: 143, 58).

But how are the generated pleasures of the *India María* films to be understood? The cultural studies scholar John Fiske differentiates between productive and evasive

pleasures, which he derives from the French semiotican Roland Barthes and his distinction between pleasures of the mind (*plaisir*) and pleasures of the body (*jouissance*) (Barthes 1975b). According to Fiske pleasures either affirm the dominant ideology (productive pleasures of the mind) or they resist it (pleasures of the body) and become evasive pleasures (Fiske 1995: 45). Fiske has argued that the reduction to the body produces evasive pleasures of the body, while pleasures gained from the story, namely the overturning established norms, are to be categorized as pleasures of the mind, which operate within the dominant ideology. Pleasures of the mind stir fantasies which can never be fulfilled in real life and function as catalyst that liberate aggression generated by social injustice. Even though Fiske's explanation lays bare mechanisms of how pleasures are generated, I would argue that the division into productive and evasive pleasures is not always obvious, and that the boundary between them is porous. In the soccer scene in LA COMADRITA for example, the character violates existing rules and at the same time, its physicality is stressed. The production of pleasure thus constantly oscillates between the body and the story.

Velasco has clearly favored an approach that stresses the entertaining value of her films and, along the lines of Fiske's theories, their reception by audiences as productive pleasures rather than evasive ones. Also, paratexts clearly contribute to the ways in which meaning of films is negotiated. Velasco's comments about her films, therefore, have a significant effect on their reception. Throughout her career, she has underlined that her main aspiration was to entertain her audiences with an innocent form of humor or *humor blanco* (white humor) (anonymous 1997b; De La Cruz Polanco 1998; El Soberbio 1989; H. Hernández 1988b; Pacheco 1988; V. H. Sánchez 1989b; Valencia 1992). Only later on in her career, she begins to voice concerns about social injustices, as I have shown earlier in my analysis of her press clippings.

Aside from the slapstick style and transgression of gender and social roles, *India María* films seem to also entertain and generate pleasures by the means of their 'bad' quality. This reading is closely linked to the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse and is grounded in the comparison of different reference frames. Here, the transgressed conventions exist within cinematic discourses and practices, which determine value and, as mentioned earlier, carry discursive authority. *India María* films are clearly marked by excessive and obvious elements of 'low quality' and 'bad' aesthetics determined by this discourse. Even the acting often comes across as infantile and dialogs are strikingly straightforward. While this aspect of her films results in negative reviews by her critics, other spectators gain pleasure from the obviousness itself. To acknowledge, "wow is that bad," can transform into, "this is so bad, it is funny." It would seem that, only some scholars and Latinos living outside Mexico and/or in the United States admit their pleasure in viewing how such 'obviousness' reverses the low quality discourse. What constitutes entertainment in Velasco's films is shaped and determined by various individual and institutional factors, not all of which can be fully decoded here since,

even though many of my interviewees enjoy the entertaining value of the *India María* films, they give relatively little insight into how Velasco achieves this.

Mexican Formula Pictures on YouTube

To this date, *India María* films as well as other Mexican Formula Pictures continue to be aired on television, they are still rented at video stores and pirated copies circulate within the Latino community. Thus, they still function as commodities among viewers. More recently, they have also been uploaded to the Internet on YouTube and other platforms where they are watched and commented on. Throughout Part II, I have repeatedly referred to the modes of reception of *India María* films among YouTube users. In the following paragraphs, I briefly summarize the characteristics of the clips on YouTube and reflect on the medium's specificity.

Generally, three types of materials can be found online. First of all, recurrent clips of *India María* feature films, in which Velasco plays the leading role, are uploaded. Each clip is accompanied with several user comments, ranging from scene related comments to fan statements. Moreover, users have defined key scenes they consider particularly funny or interesting and have posted them online. Additionally, one can find material on *La India María* apart from the feature films. Among them are excerpts from the television shows SIEMPRE EN DOMINGO (MX, 1971), REVISTA MUSICAL NESCAFE (MX, 1971), and ¡AY MARÍA QUÉ PUNTERÍA! / HEY MARIA WHAT A STUPIDITY (TV, MX, 1998) by María Elena Velasco (1998). There is also a short television documentary on María Elena Velasco and amateur recordings of her appearances at public events such as *ferias,* or fairs. Much in the same way for these posts, in their comments, users tend to express their admiration for both the character and the performer. Finally, some online users themselves have produced short clips and uploaded them. These clips seek to imitate, heighten and create parodies of *La India María* and can be considered as the most productive appropriations of Velasco's films because they generate new individual interpretations and variations.

Other Mexican Formula Pictures star performers and films are appropriated much in the same way. For the film LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO (1976) my example of the border adventures category of Mexican Formula Pictures, a wide variety of materials and comments can also be found online, ranging from the original song performed by the band *Los Tigres del Norte*, to selected scenes: including the final showdown, a re-staging of the song, fan comments on the performers (the Almada brothers) as well as comments on the border crossing experience. Another example is the star performer Rosa Gloria Chagoyán and her character *Lola La Trailera*. Images of her circulate on YouTube and highlight the character's fighting powers and her female body, along with her performance in a variety of clips from scenes in the films.

For the purposes of my research, I frame the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures on YouTube within the theoretical field of 'participatory culture'. Similar to Fiske, other cultural studies scholars like Jean Burgess and Josuah Green, are interested in the construction of meaning through popular culture. They attribute YouTube with a high potential to involve users and stimulate them to actively contribute to the construction of meaning (Burgess and Green 2009: 10). Hence, the act of posting clips online is both an example of and has the potential to proffer producerly activities. In the case of YouTube, meaning and pleasure are constructed within the community by each member actively contributing, either cementing dominant discourses or creating compensatory ones.[100]

What implication does this theoretical approach have for Mexican Formula Pictures today? Foremost, I propose that the comments online signal a reception that does not differ fundamentally from the appropriations of viewers I interviewed — they are all 'negotiated'. Online users, like theatre audiences, might simply enjoy the slapstick scenes, critique the quality of the films, or reflect on their diaspora identity. Nevertheless, I am convinced that YouTube offers an ideal platform to create compensatory discourses. Until the late 1980s, Mexican Formula Pictures where harshly condemned by film critics across Mexican newspapers. Back then, moviegoers lacked the means to express their fondness for the films, other than assisting at screenings and sharing their opinion with other people present at the screenings. The Internet, and YouTube in particular, offer a platform to express opinions and articulate views that oppose to dominant discourses. This compensatory function of YouTube becomes most evident in the evolution of the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse. Taking a closer look at online comment threads, it can be observed that negative reactions to Mexican Formula Pictures judging their quality are rare. Those that have appeared are often deleted for hardly discernable reasons. Often negative comments trigger counter-accusations and animated discussion defending *India María* films against such judgments that 'repeat' and contribute to the cemented image of Mexican Formula Pictures as products of 'low' symbolic value.

More generally for the appropriations of Mexican Formula Pictures, I suggest that YouTube plays and important role. Research projects with similar aims, and other objects of research, have provided some insight (Snickars and Vonderau 2009). Their assumptions have, however, often been rather generic, reaffirming that the Internet

[100] In 1978, Fiske and Hartley have argued similarly, suggesting that television engaged viewers actively and fulfilled a "bardic function". In order to explain the bardic function they refer to the bard, a mediator of language who stressed the collective rather than the self (Fiske and Hartley 1988: 85). As Roland Barthes noted before, the mediator as opposed to the author, never assumes the full responsibility for a narrative, but rather are meanings constructed by different members of a community (Fiske and Hartley 1988: 86).

enhances user participation and contributes to a collective construction of meaning.[101] This leads me to a rather obvious conclusion: The participatory receptions are important but however not unique for Mexican Formula Pictures. They form part of a larger phenomenon involving the Internet and in particular the YouTube platform. Hence, although assuming that online appropriations of Mexican Formula Pictures create compensatory discourses and eventually even posses the potential of resistance is interesting, arguably, it is the medium rather than its content that enables such a reception.

Some Concluding Comments

In the previous chapters, I have analyzed the various possible receptions of *India María* films, combining methods such as film analysis, historic context and content analysis with qualitative interviews. In the end, I came to discern four negotiated receptions. Viewers either enjoy the films' entertaining value, watch them critically, focus on aspects of diaspora — including aspects of the national —, or play with fantasies of empowerment. Each reception is further constituted by different factors fashioned by the film, the apparatus, the reception context and preexisting discourses.

Significantly, viewers tend to choose an empowering reception, when the depiction of gender roles, the character's social status or its ethnicity is foregrounded and transgressed. I have shown that such a reception is strongly influenced by the films themselves, but also by media representations of the performer, María Elena Velasco, who conveys an image that takes indigenous Mexicans seriously, positioning herself close to the people while also occupying a unique position as a woman within a male dominated film industry. Hence, an empowering reception contains elements of resistance against existing power structures on many levels. Even though viewers admit they find pleasure in viewing the character's resistance and her empowerment in the film, they rarely state that the films had an empowering effect transferrable to their daily lives.

A critical appropriation, exemplary of film critics, accuses Velasco for keeping in line with the existing ideology of the time. Negative judgments primarily stem from an understanding of the character as a mere ethnic stereotype and racist depiction of an indigenous woman. Critics also find fault in the films for their low quality, which they consider do not live up to Hollywood norms or the quality of films from the predating much praised historic period of Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema. In addition, forces within the field of cultural production have contributed to the judgment of Velasco's films as low quality. Similarly, the lack of development of the character and Velasco's

[101] For approaches on YouTube consult *The YouTube Reader* with various interesting contributions from different scholars (Snickars and Vonderau 2009). A good departure point on participatory aspects of the Internet is made by Staiger (2009). Thornton (2010) and Siling Li (2009) provide interesting case studies. A more general overview on Latin American Cyberculture is provided by Taylor and Pitman (2007).

‘stagnating’ acting career, have been subjects of criticism. Since, film critics posses a discursive authority and they have a strong medium through which to express themselves, their corrosive judgments and opinions have a stronger influence than those of other viewers. Their support through box-office turnout bolstered to the position of many Mexican Formula Picture producers who, in their defense against the critics, considered film solely as a profit making business.

Another focus of Part II lies on entertaining aspects of the *India María* films, which mainly rely in the slapstick performance, the excessively displayed spectacles and a constant break with gender and social roles, and even as a comment of the quality of the films, when seen as an effect and in the context of underdevelopment.

In addition, I have observed that interviewees residing in the United States tend to focus on aspects of diaspora in the reception process. This reception is strongly shaped by the viewing context and the fact that people watching *India María* films together are bonded by a shared experience of displacement. Nevertheless, receptions focusing on aspects of diaspora are extremely broad. While some viewers understand the films as instructions of how to cross the border, others use them to reinforce the myth of border adventures. In yet other occasions, a more nostalgic reception occurs through a revived memory of the homeland stressing aspects of national identity. Lastly both interviews and online comments affirm that the films are also used as a means to express a sense of Latino pride, by reclaiming them as objects of popular culture. For the reception regarding national aspects or more precisely, Mexicanness, it can be stated, that such a reception is closely aligned and constantly mixed with diasporic aspets of the diasporic. Interviewees, who were displaced from their homeland, nostalgically remembered their country of origin, while those living in Mexico, seldom saw the films as manifestations of national pride, but at the most as critiques of it, instead.

Throughout Part II, I have reiterated that the distinct receptions not be understood as pure categories, and that, in fact, viewers regularly change their focus during screenings and even within scenes, shifting their attention, for example, from for instant entertainment to aspects of diaspora. Also, all receptions are situated and depend strongly on the viewing context.

In addition, I have repeatedly pointed out how the films and in particular the character, *La India María*, transgresses common gender and social rules and conventions through, for example, occupying spaces or the acquisitions of props that are gendered or socially marked. I have further shown how the same transgression might either lead to an empowering on entertaining reception. Moreover, viewers constantly reevaluate the slapstick acting, the quality of the films and the depiction of certain themes with filmic conventions, such as the border as a dangerous zone. Thus viewers can choose to shift their attention from one factor to the other, or focus on the interplay which in the end

leads to a dilution of distinctions between reception and points out that there are no clear-cut limits differentiating reception modes.

This leads me to draw some general conclusions about the research on my case study as well as point to its limitations. First and foremost, I was confronted with the fact that no previous research existed on *India María* films and on their reception in particular. This fact made me extremely aware that this research only scratches the surface of an as yet widely unexplored field. The lack of previous scholarship on the subject carried with it a significant problem — I did not have a base on which I could build. Nevertheless, my research set out to answer basic questions such as "who liked/disliked the films?" and "how do the films address spectators through, for instance, the display of spectacles?" In addition to an already rocky foundation on which I could ground my findings, the number of people interviewed for this study was limited to thirty. Needless to say that due to a rather small number of interviewees, caution must be applied to avoid simple generalizations when analyzing the results. I welcome further research that would carefully review my findings. Clearly, such a small number of interviewees make it impossible to discern more than a vague impression of the influence from variables like age and class — an important factor to be explored by future research.

Also, as is often the case, limitation of both the scope of this study and the parameters of the research, make it impossible to integrate all findings. For instance, many homosexuals are avowed *India María* admirers. The few ones I talked to, and in particular the Mexican director Julián Hernández, known for his films with stories centering on gay characters such as MIL NUBES DE PAZ, CERCANEL CIELO, AMOR, JAMÁS ACABARÁS DE SER AMOR / A THOUSAND CLOUDS OF PEACE (MX, 2003), EL CIELO DIVIDIDO / BROKEN SKY (MX, 2006) or RABIOSO SOL, RABIOSO CIELO / RAGING SUN, RAGING SKY (MX, 2009) admire *La India María* and appropriate her as an object of gay pride. Two homosexuals interviewed out of curiosity about this phenomenon have explained to me that *La India María's* otherness and her marginality was one reason she was dearly liked in this community.[102] It could be argued that through Velasco's

[102] In various academic fields, questions of race, class and gender have been addressed in different ways, all based on the assumption that identities are constructed through 'difference', namely through binary oppositions such as men/women, upper/lower class or whites/blacks. Research in the fields of cultural studies, linguistics and psychoanalysis suggests that such oppositions are seldom neutral; instead, they are embedded within structures of power, with one being dominant and the 'other' being marked by its 'otherness' (Hall 1997: 235). This also partly explains why discussions of race, class and gender of minorities often emphasize the aspect of 'otherness'. Despite the fruitfulness and wide proliferation of such analyses, I believe it is crucial to always sketch out the context in which the question of the dominant or the self versus the 'other' are discussed. Who, for instance, is the 'other' in a film that is primarily focused on working-class characters, depicted as heroes, if the audience primarily consists of working-class viewers? To simply categorize the working-class hero as the 'other' because he is commonly assigned to a subordinate position within society would in my opinion be wrong or at least misleading. Some spectators, e.g. gay men, engage with Mexican Formula Picture characters precisely

obviousness and excessive performance she turned *La India María* into a 'camp' character. However, three interviews and similar information gathered from informal conversations clearly do not suffice to draw conclusions on the reception of *La India María* by homosexuals.

Throughout this dissertation, I have times and times pointed to parallels between the *India María* films and the Mexican Formula Pictures, identifying them belonging to this category and era of Mexican filmmaking. I have formulated the same hypothesis for similarities in reception of Velasco's work and that of her contemporaries. Nevertheless, the findings of my case study are not sufficient and it would clearly be premature to draw more than general conclusions about the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures, which is however the aim of the following chapters.

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because they feel that they are for once not being depicted as the 'other'. This again might not be the case for the depiction of gender or race within the same film. Even though otherness is still a widely discussed concept within the field of cultural studies, I have refrained from making any general claims about it, due to my conviction that it would only lead to confusion instead of clarification.

Part III: Towards a Model for the Reception of Mexican Formula Pictures

As outlined for the *India María* films, their reception is highly complex, with numerous factors influencing how viewers make sense and gain pleasures from films. On the following pages, I take a step back from my case study, to draw some general conclusions on how Mexican Formula Pictures can be understood and used by specators. More precicely, I delve into various factors that determine the reception modes of Mexican Formula Pictures. To begin with, factors such as gender, class and ethniciy as well as community affiliations play a key role. I particularly emphasize that the culturally variegated nature of spectatorship derives from the diverse locations in which films are received, which in this case means the United States as opposed to Mexico. Further, I point to interrelationships between the display of spectacle and narration, which are important in the process of reception. Yet another focus lies on characters, which are often depicted as types and performers conveying an image in the press. I continue by exploring how modes of exhibition fashion reception. Furthermore, I outline the importance of the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse. Ultimately, the goal of this part of the dissertation is to lay the groundwork for further analysis of spectatorship with regard to Mexican Formula Pictures. For this purpose, I suggest a model of reception for Mexican Formula Pictures, which takes magnifolds elements such as the text, the paratext, the context, discourses as well as practices into account. This leads me to discern four different reception modes.

Who Is Watching?

As previously illustrated for my case study, the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures is formulated on the assumption that spectatorship is unterstood in terms of the tension between 'actual' viewers and theoretical spectators and also through the grid of multiculturalism. Clearly the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures depends on many factors ranging from ethnicity to class, gender, age and geographical place.

Most importantly, when analyzing the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures the following aspects concerning ethnicity need to be considered: 1) the ethnic marking of characters on screen is linked to 2) the ethnicity of the viewers and 3) of the researcher. These three positions are dependent on another and are in constant motion.

My hypotheis on the impact of gender on Mexican Formula Pictures — in contrast to the *India María* films — is formulated generally, suggesting that gender is one identity that always intersects with others such as class, age or ethnicity. Significantly, intersections make it almost impossible to clearly attribute receptions to a single variable. Nevertheless the depictions of bodies are key. The dancers in the *fichera* films and the heroines stripped down to nudity in the border films or the muscular wrestlers, clearly triggger gendered readings.

Aspects of class are also of essential importance for Mexican Formula Pictures. Viewers watching Mexican Formula Pictures could thus be grouped into class segments by their education, their economic capital and their taste. To collect such empirical data with hindsight is highly complex. The absence of previous systematic research on class and is connection to taste within the Mexican context makes it highly complex to explore the relationship between class and the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures. Also, in the United States a person's migrant status, which clearly determines a person's economic capital, crucially influences reception. Iglesias substantiates my claim with a study of the audiences of border cinema (one category of Mexican Formula Pictures). She finds that most of the viewers were undocumented migrants who had lived in the United States less than one and a half years (32.5%) or less than four years (25.5%) (Iglesias 1999: 237). She further notes that some 13.3% of moviegoers in the United States said that they were illiterate, whereas the percentage for illiterate viewers surveyed in Mexico was significantly lower at 4.75%. Moreover, the people surveyed had little schooling. Again, migrant viewers in the United States commonly went through a shorter schooling period than those in Mexico (Iglesias 1999: 237). Even if Iglesias' study focuses on border cinema, similar characteristics can be assumed more generally for the audience of Mexican Formula Pictures.

This leads me to another important notion that is fundamental to the research of Mexican Formula Pictures. As numerous film scholars have stressed previously, spectatorship can no longer be reduced to the cinematic level, but has to be understood across media (Mayne 1993: 32; Shohat and Stam 1994: 347ff.; Staiger 2009: x). This is of crucial importance for Mexican Formula Pictures that have circulated among different media ranging from television to movie theaters and the Internet. Among other reasons, because of their circulation across media, Mexican Formula Pictures have experienced multifaceted receptions: For instance, viewers create their own parodies of the films and publish them online. Other users make comments on these clips online.

Yet another factor to consider in the study of the reception of Mexican Formula Pictures is the influence of age. Age plays a pivotal role with respect to habits of media consumption. It is an acknowledged fact that different age groups use different media in different ways. Whereas elderly people continue watching Mexican Formula Pictures on either television or on DVD, younger users often seek these materials online; they

comment on them or produce short parodies which they then again put at disposal of other users.

Finally, I wish to point to spectators' knowledge about production and the intersection of the different factors that are introduced. Staiger, who has researched production and reception extensively, points to the fact that spectators are often aware of their media sources. They generally know who produces what, with what means and for what purpose. At the same time, they are conscious of contextual information about production circumstances, for instance (Staiger 2005: 140). This leads to the assumption that depictions of ethnic or gendered bodies, along with class representations, always have to be considered in relation to the spectators' knowledge about the production.

The interviews and conversations I conducted for the *India María* films, have revealed that the very notion of pure categories, be it on the level of ethnicity, gender, age, class, etc., fall short, because viewers are involved in multiple identities. Similarly, interviewees would not positioned themselves within a purely resistant or affirmative position *vis-à-vis* Mexican Formula Pictures. The outlined factors are thus to be understood as a general grid.

Addressing the Spectator through Spectacle and Character Types

Mexican Formula Pictures, similar to the *India María* films, combine what is commonly considered a classical narrative structure (a story with a conflict, a climax and a resolution) with the display of spectacular elements in the sense of Gunning's cinema of attraction. Hence spectators of Mexican Formula Pictures are addressed through cues and schemata of the narratives as well as spectacular elements. Generally, spectators possess enough knowledge of formulaic narrative patterns to be able to foresee narrative climaxes. However, in many Mexican Formula Pictures, the classical narrative structure is continuously slowed down by insertions of spectacles, delaying the unfolding of the story. These displays address spectators by surprising or even shocking them, and often, narrative climaxes and (at times) resolutions are entirely composed of such spectacular acts.

To demonstrate my general claim with an example of Mexican Formula Pictures, I use the film LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO / THE RED CAR GANG (Ruben Galindo, MX, 1976), introduced previously as having exemplary status as a border film. The story is simple: Four Mexicans, who come from different social backgrounds, migrate to the United States. Contrary to their expectations, they all struggle to survive (exposition). When they are offered a fortune to transport drugs across the border, they give in (conflict). They succeed (climax), but are all killed in the final scene (resolution). The outlined narrative development clearly corresponds to classical patterns: exposition, conflict leading to a climax, and subsequent resolution. However, the story is enriched or

delayed by numerous acts of display such as a band's performance of songs and by spectacular battle scenes. Instead of the narrative climax — the actual drug trafficking across the border — the film's ending (the narrative resolution) is the grand finale of LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO, lasting over eight minutes, with all four main characters, the border patrol and the band reappearing. LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO is by far no exception, but many Mexican Formula Pictures combine the logic of attraction with a grand finale at the end and a classic narrative pattern. The combination of a classic narrative structure with spectacle might result in a reception, in which spectators foreground either element or switch between the two. By doing so, they shift from making sense of the story, to simply enjoying the entertainment provided by the spectacles displayed.

Ill. 96 and Ill. 97: Various attractions halt the development of the story in LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO (1976) such as the repeated performance of the title song by a band.

As the *India María* films, Mexican Formula Pictures bear signs of what Fiske labels "producerly" texts. To relate Fiske's claims, I argue that Mexican Formula Picture are highly accessible through their classical narrative structure, yet they include elements such as extremely violent battles and long performance numbers lasting many minutes. In the final battle of the film LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO, for example, all four protagonists are killed in a violent exchange of gunfire. Their bodies are riddled with bullets, and blood is splashing. Each death is shown in full length, and the camera is addressed directly.

Ill. 98 and Ill. 99: In LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO the final scene depicts a fulminant showdown, displaying violence as attractions.

The scene might not only be labeled excessive, it could also be claimed that it contains what Fiske describes as 'offending' elements, much like puns in written texts. More precisely, in the showdown scene of LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO, I attribute the offending elements to the *mise-en-scène*: artificial blood is used effusively, and no effort is made to make it look real. The offensiveness here is due to the arbitrariness; instead of the final showdown being neatly crafted, the element (blood) is used in excess in order to reach the scene's goal: to shock the spectator. Similarly, the title song *La banda del carro rojo*, which is performed by a cover band several times throughout the film, could be identified as a sign of a producerly text since the musical performances (obvious) are neatly tucked into the linear narrative (accessible). Not only is the same song performed various times, but also the *mise-en-scène* of the performances bears a striking resemblance. Usually the musicians face the firmly positioned camera (see Ill. 96). Unlike performances in many American musicals, the musical performances in Mexican Formula Pictures do not figure as moments of emotional excess closely related to the mood of the protagonist, but rather foreground the act of performing itself (Altman 2002: 44; Laing 2000: 7). Also, the performance could be labeled as obvious and excessive: obvious because the lyrics repeat the story, excessive because the song is performed over and over without advancing the narrative. As previously mentioned, most Mexican Formula Pictures include such pastiches of popular musical hits. Often the popular tunes are separately listed as menu items on DVDs. The almost obligatory appearance of a band along and the foregrounding of songs on the DVD clearly trigger an active and engaging reception.

Yet another general characteristic of Mexican Formula Picture narratives is their reliance on character-driven plots with either one main protagonist or a group of protagonists. Often, certain character types such as, for instance, the wrestler or the mean coyote (human trafficker) reappear in a myriad of films as well as across different media (theater, television, film, comics). Just as with the character *La India María,* these character types have been cemented with time and they have gradually acquired

an emblematic status. The same holds true for the actors impersonating certain types. The character types at stake all have appeared in numerous films and across different media formats.

I speak of types when describing Mexican Formula Pictures characters. Despite the widespread use of the term 'stereotype' to describe schematically reduced characters, I would not label the Mexican Formula Picture characters as stereotypes for numerous reasons. First of all, the term has given rise to discussions in various academic fields for decades. In the social sciences (psychological and sociological perspectives), in literary, cultural and film studies, different approaches and research interests have been stressed. This has led to a considerable amount of confusion, which persists to this day. Second, filmic stereotypes are often regarded as negative depictions of ethnic minorities. Charles Ramírez Berg, for example, reduces what is commonly understood as stereotyping to the simple equation "category making + ethnocentrism + prejudice = stereotyping" (Ramírez Berg 2002: 15). A stereotype is consequently the result of a process and can be defined as a negative generalization used by an in-group (us) about an out-group (them) (Ramírez Berg 2002: 15). Ramírez Berg convincingly illustrates his claim by demonstrating how Latinos are often depicted negatively in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Nevertheless, I am highly critical of this equation, due in part to my conviction that spectators produce meanings and pleasures on an individual basis. In the case of Mexican Formula Pictures, for instance, the majority of characters are schematically reduced, and most of them are ethnically and sexually marked. As illustrated for my case study, this does not mean that they are automatically perceived negatively; it could just as well be the contrary. In fact, whether or not reductive depictions are understood negatively or categorized as 'not real' largely depends on the positioning of the spectators — or, as the film scholar Elizabeth Cowie has pointed out, the designation of a text depends not on a recognition of elements present in the text but on a reading of those elements through the concepts and meanings located in other discourses (Cowie 1977: 19).

As previously noted, *El Santo* figures as a wrestler fighting evil forces in numerous Mexican Formula Pictures. This example should shed light on the process of address through a character type other than *La India María*. *El Santo* is most certainly a character type; spectators familiar with Mexican culture know about his reputable qualities through his inter-, trans- and paratextual appearances.[103] Significantly, little needs to be shown in order to establish the character. A single take of the Rio Grande indicates the setting of the film, in SANTO EN LA FRONTERA DEL TERROR / SANTO ON THE TERROR BORDER (Rafael Pérez Grovas, MX, 1969) in the border region. This initial shot is directly followed by a wrestling match scene: *El Santo*, disguised in his

[103] In the previous part, I have introduced the terms inter-, trans-, and paratext as derived from Taylor and Tröhler (1999: 138). I use the term 'intertext' when describing patterns in different films. The 'transtextual', on the other hand, implies repetitions across media formats.

wrestling outfit consisting of his silver mask, tight pants and his topless upper body is carried into the ring on the shoulders of his fans, who encourage him with loud cheering. The camera frames him from a low angle. At the latest, when *El Santo* enters the ring, he is typified as a *técnico* (a good guy) as two wrestlers attack him using cheating, unnecessary roughness and trickery. Spectators consequently invest *El Santo* with the moral qualities of a fair wrestler who fights for a good purpose and they know that he will figure as the main protagonist and the hero of the film. By ascribing typified qualities (wrestler and hero), spectators automatically include him in the logic of wrestling which Roland Barthes has described as follows: "The public is uninterested in whether or not it is rigged, because it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle — what matters is not what one thinks, but what one sees" (Barthes 1972: 15). This logic is underlined by *El Santo* foregrounding primarily his corporality. His shiny muscular upper body characterizes his physique. The overtly marked fighting gestures and postures also figure as the main means of resolving the conflicts presented within the story of the film.


Ill. 100 and Ill. 101: In SANTO EN LA FRONTERA DEL TERROR (1969) the main hero *El Santo* can be analyzed according to the criteria of the clock of characters.

When later on in the story of the same film *El Santo* ventures on a dangerous journey to the border to defeat a mad scientist who exploits undocumented Mexican workers and to free his compatriots, he leaps fences, fights fervently and puts his body at risk. He is further defined by his performance of religious rituals such as praying and worshiping Catholic symbols. Although *El Santo*'s ethnicity is to some extent neutralized through the wearing of a mask, he is clearly established as being a member of Mexico's lower class by his profession as a wrestler. Significantly, *El Santo*'s aim is mostly to bring about an escapist relief for the fellow members of his class. His character type is provided with positive features and therefore addresses the Mexican working class spectators as 'their' hero fighting for a good cause. *El Santo* not only became a symbol of a working class hero but also represents a fairly straightforward catharsis of wrestling, in which the spectacle of abjection is redeemed through the triumph of good (Levi 1999: 179). Concurrently his acting style, which often comes across as wooden,

can be regarded as a result of the Mexican Formula Picture production mode, which is restricted by low budgets and short production times.

Conflation of Types and Stars

Mexican Formula Picture character types address spectators in ways that are inextricably linked to their inter-, trans- and paratextual representations as well as to circulating images of the performers who embody a certain type. What I want to draw attention to is the way that Mexican Formula Picture character types and performers address spectators in their conflation as mediated personas.

Before drawing a more general conclusion on the construction of media images of Mexian Formula Pictures stars, I introduce three female perfromers, namly Rosa Gloria Chagoyán, Isela Vega and Sascha Montenegro, which I believe are higly interesting. Film scholar Catherine Benamou has convincingly argued that Chagoyán could be seen as a symbol of Mexicanness as the modern version of the iconic figure *la soldadera* — the female Mexican revolutionary soldier. Like *La India María*, who also plays with the image of the *soldadera*, as described earlier, in a scene in LA PRESIDENTA MUNICIPAL, Chagoyán's persona does not neatly fit into gender- and class-bound genre parameters. Benamou claims that *Lola La Trailera* represents, above all, the modern version of the virgin archetype (Benamou 2009: 176). Although I feel Benamou's comparison of *Lola La Trailera* to the virgin is rather far-fetched, I do agree, nonetheless, that Chagoyán has been able, much like Velasco, to cleverly combine her role as an action heroine and her star image as an everywoman with a sense of affection for the less fortunate (Benamou 2009: 173). Their characters, too, bear the same resemblance: *India María*, like *Lola* is clearly portrayed as being 'of the people' (del pueblo). In addition, *Lola La Trailera* oscillates between seductress and modest, yet proud, cowgirl. When she brutally kills her opponents, she does so for a good reason. Mostly, she fights against injustice caused by unfair power constellations. Chagoyán also, and to this date, regularly appears on radio and TV as a host giving everyday advice to common folk, further stressing her association to ordinariness. In general, she openly defends women's rights (Benamou 2009: 175, 76). Like most Mexican Formula stars, Chagoyán's star image is complemented and brought closer to her fans through music and song performed live at country fairs. Like with Velasco's *India María*, Chagoyán's productions and their reception by a wide audience are informed by both her character and star image, which also suggest the transgression of common gender roles on both levels.

Sasha Montenegro and Isela Vega (introduced on page 26), this time in the category of sexy film, challenge the notion of gender, albeit in significantly different ways. At the time of their films' releases, the films were seen as offensive due to their excessive depiction of onscreen sex and, in Vega's case, for the abundant use of improper language and 'manly' swearing. The characters impersonated by both women break

with images of female archetypes such as the virgin or the submissive suffering woman all too common in Mexican film (De la Mora 2009: 250). Likewise, both women have provoked numerous scandals in the press. Montenegro made headlines through her affair with the Mexican president, López Portillo, and Isela Vega shocked the public when she posed for *Playboy* magazine as a Mexican female revolutionary (De la Mora 2009: 250). Vega herself admits to wanting her scandals to be seen as acts of rebellion that shake people up and get them to think critically (Diaz 2007: 12 cit. in Mora 2009: 245.)

Both Vega and Montenegro consciously constructed star images that established them as 'bad girls' who do not fit into well established definitions of gender difference in Mexico. Film scholar, Sergio De la Mora, argues that Mexico's sexy movies, and in particular Vega's films, can be seen as manifestations of sexual liberation. Mora particularly points to the inclusion of gay male characters in many sexy movies — who had previously been absent from the Mexican screen and puts into question gendered stereotypes specific to men, limited to heterosexual identities (2006: 111, 14).

The question remains, to what extent stars and stardom in the context of Mexican Formula Pictures are constructed, more generally. In the following paragraphs, I point to parallels to Richard Dyer's findings on stardom (Dyer 2000b: 124; 2000a: 121; 2004: 3ff). Clearly, the construction of Mexican Formula stars is based on premises similar to Dyer's, although differences exist.

According to Dyer, the making of stars is a multilayered process that involves everything that is publicly available about a star. A star's image is thus never limited to his or her films. Movie promotions, public appearances, handouts such as postcards, interviews, biographies, criticism and commentaries in the press, all contribute to his or her image (Dyer 2000a: 121ff; 2004: 2). Dyer also includes in a star's image what people say, gossip or write about him or her. He further adds the ways in which an image is used in other contexts such as advertisements and songs. Like Hollywood stars, Mexican Formula Picture stars are established inter-, trans- and paratextually, with different aspects of the star image stressed in various contexts. Besides the films, posters, public appearances, postcards, interviews, press coverage, gossip, advertisements, songs and 'real' fights — in the case of *El Santo* — influence the construction of a star's image.

However, there is no general rule as to which elements predominate in a Mexican Formula Pictures star's image. Some stars are most acclaimed for their film appearances, others have established their star image in the theater, and yet others are most known for their music. Additionally, the predominant elements in the making of a star's image change in the course of the career. Depending on the period, other elements of a star's image are accentuated. This implies that star images have histories (Dyer

2004: 3). For instance, one of Mexico's most renowned stars, Pedro Infante, was first widely known as a singer before becoming one of Mexico's famous movie stars during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, with both numerous albums and films to his credit (De la Mora 2006; Heredia 2008).

Contrary to Hollywood stars, few biographies of Mexican Formula Picture stars exist, because they are still associated with low quality, and even though many spectators admire them, their work has been considered lowbrow and not worthy of any biographies. The wrestler *El Santo* is probably the only exception so far. In recent years he has gradually become a hero of popular culture with devoted fans across the world (Fernández Reyes 2004; Greene 2005; Syder and Tierney 2005; Wilt 1998). In Mexico City's new airport terminal, there is even a shop exclusively selling *El Santo* products ranging from comics to wrestling robes and backpacks.

Although Mexican Formula Picture stars were sure to draw the masses to movie theaters and thereby guaranteed revenues, a relatively low degree of control has been exercised by the industry. The Mexican film industry never thoroughly regulated the promotion of films and the making of star images. Often, the stars playing certain character types made films with numerous production companies, contributing to certain inconsistencies in the communication of star images. Furthermore, publicists did not control stars' transtextual appearances (in the ring, on stage or on television). These circumstances might have resulted in certain contradictions within the polysemy — understood here as the communication of multiple meanings — of the star's image. Also, Mexican Formula Pictures stars were paid low salaries compared to Hollywood stars (Goldin and Cooper 1986: 18, 20).

However, the most important difference between Hollywood and Mexican Formula Picture stars is to be found in the trajectory leading to their star status. Unlike Hollywood stars, most Mexican Formula Picture stars are directly linked to a certain character type. Usually the character type moved into the limelight first, and only subsequently did the person embodying the type become famous. *Cantinflas*, for example, is primarily associated with his character type. Only later, did audiences become interested in the performer Fortino Mario Alfonso Moreno Reyes. Also, *Cantinflas* is called *Cantinflas* inter-, trans- and paratextually in promotional materials, gossip or even when he is referred to as a union member. The blurring or even annulment of the division between the star as a media persona and the character type he/she impersonates is rather unique in the Mexican context. However, this phenomenon predates, as the examples show, the era during which the Mexican Formula Pictures were produced; it goes back as far as the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. As a consequence of the aforementioned succession of character types moving into the limelight before performers, star images mostly fit characters perfectly, because they are mostly identical, incorporating all facets of both, the character type as well as

the star's image. Significantly, the high degree of consistency between the screen image and the image transmitted in interviews has certain implications for how spectators judge stars and character types.

Watching Mexican Formula Pictures

When spectators make sense or gain pleasure from films and other cultural commodities the viewing context plays a pivotal role. This is particularly true of Mexican Formula Pictures, which have been watched at theaters and in front of the small screen as well as online accompanied by many side activities. Whereas most scholars draw a sharp line between watching films at the theater vs. watching them at home, I argue that in the case of Mexican Formula Pictures the viewing context is enriched with various side activities at the theater as well as at home. In both cases, there are restraints to the viewers' full immersion in the film.

As for the *India María films*, in venues screening Mexican Formula Pictures, extrafilmic practices were not only tolerated, but actively encouraged. Exhibitors spared no effort to transform the theatergoing experience into a carnival-like event. They organized slide presentations or hired performers to attend screenings, much in the same way as exhibitors of of U.S. exploitation films (Schaefer 1999: 6). In some U.S. theaters viewers were actively encouraged to get on stage to perform a song between screenings or sing along with the popular tunes that regularly appear in Mexican Formula Pictures. The visual anthropologist Norma Iglesias has studied the reception of border action movies, a category of Mexican Formula Pictures, observing numerous activities during screenings. She states that the film itself seemed to be the least important thing for the audience members in Tijuana, Mexico, where members of the audience read comic books or were constantly going in and out. Often loud voices whistling, chattering or telling jokes were audible, and at times, the audience applauded when something thrilling happened on screen (Iglesias 1999: 242).

Despite the existence of scattered observations, no systematic research exists on the viewing conditions and side activities for Mexican Formula Pictures. The existing information is restricted to comments by some journalists and scholars of Latin American cinema who have pointed to numerous side activities during screenings and the importance of the moviegoing experience per se. The *Los Angeles Times* journalist Lee Grant, for instance, writes about the Los Angeles Latino theaters:

> Touring the theaters on Sunday, the noise level was pretty high. Babies cried, older children ran up the aisles or played video games in the lobbies. Inside lighting was kept less than pitch-black. At the concession stands *churros* were sold alongside hot dogs, nachos next to popcorn (Grant 1982).

This observation is one example of many. Usually the journalists and scholars observe and describe the theatergoing experience as deviating from the norm or they recall vivid memories. Similarly, the people interviewed for this study tended to idealize the

viewing conditions they had experienced. I am aware that both the data derived from interviews with audience members and the personal memories of scholars harbor the risk of idealizing the past. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the exhibition situation for Mexican Formula Pictures differed considerably from other theatergoing experiences and surely influenced the way viewers made sense of these films. In fact the bustle within the theater might have seemed peculiar and fascinating to many film scholars and critics, alike.

Watching Mexican Formula Pictures in front of the television screen was also accompanied by numerous activities. Many of the people I interviewed (in the United States and Mexico) recalled numerous Sundays on which they watched Mexican Formula Pictures (among them the *India María* films) in their living rooms with friends and family, repeating lines, singing along, talking back to characters, making fun of them and at times expressing their amusement about how poorly the films were crafted. Many interviewees also pointed out that they watched Mexican Formula Pictures over and over on TV, VHS or DVD until they almost knew them by heart. One could consequently speak of a Mexican Formula *replay culture*, as suggested by the film scholar Barbara Klinger in her research on the home theater (Klinger 2004, 2006, 2010). She insists on the pleasure of repetition, which is enhanced when the viewers are familiar with the story (Klinger 2006: 154). Through repetition films gain a special value for the construction of spectators' identities. By, for instance, reciting movies lines spectators appropriate texts and internalize nostalgic memories (Klinger 2006: 183).

Morover, receptions of Mexican Formula Pictures are closely linked to the migration experience. Again, I am confronted with a lack of data on Mexican Formula Pictures, which forces me to draw from research results for the U.S. context. Judith Mayne's (2004) and Russell Merritt's (1976) studies of early cinema and migrants contribute to a more thorough understanding of the importance of moviegoing for minority groups. It is a common notion that theaters functioned as spaces where migrants became familiar with customs and manners of their new country, or they simply sought a moment of distraction from daily life. Mayne and Russell Merritt argue that not the films but the act of going to the movies mattered most for migrants. The visit to the theater was clearly a means through which migrants came to know each other and built a shared sense of their situation (Mayne 2004: 359; Merritt 1976: 64). Concurrently, it provided leisure at a low cost and a release from daily pressure (Mayne 2004: 361).

In accordance with Mayne's claim that the experience of moviegoing was crucial for migrants at the turn of the 20th century, attending the theater had various functions for Mexican migrants. The Mexican Formula Pictures mainly attracted Mexicans and Latinos who had recently immigrated and satisfied their wish for films in their mother tongue (Iglesias 1999). While some actually went to the theater to watch films, others

used it as a meeting point in a public space. Also, audience members continuously oscillate between immersion in the narrative and interaction with other audience members. during screenings, viewers actively discussed the relationships between the plot and their own experiences. The Chicano scholar Avalos also describes side activities that were not related to the films. He recalls, "I vividly remember a trip to a dilapidated movie theater in Fresno, California. For the price of admission, my parents got free or reduced-rate counsel from a paralegal in an upstairs office next to the projectionist. While my parents and other Mexican illegal migrants obtained assistance with the challenge of legalizing their status in the United States, we children were captivated by the film screened…" (Avalos 2009: 185). Avalos' memories dating back to the late 1970s and the 1980s are symptomatic of the period during which moviegoing was a practice which formed part of the daily lives of Mexican migrants. The theaters provided them with a public space where they satisfied both their need for social interaction with people who were having similar experiences and their desire to temporarily escape from everyday reality. The scholar Iglesias even considers moviegoing as a social ceremony that helps spectators to feel less lonely in the face of their foreign and undocumented status (Iglesias 1999: 240). She substantiates her hypothesis with her findings that most interviewees went to the theater without even knowing what film was going to be screened (Iglesias 1999: 240). Iglesias' research is limited to one category of Mexican Formula Pictures, namely border action films, but Mexican Formula Pictures more generally fulfill similar functions.

Finally, I wish to point to one last factor, namely the historical development of venues and transtextual references, which influence viewing conditions and are often ignored. Clearly, in the case of the Mexican Formula Pictures such historical developments have crucially determined the viewing context. Most importantly, a close relationship exists between the movie theater and the wrestling arena (wrestling films) as well as the former vaudeville stages, where many of the performers appeared concurrently with their appearances in film. Film scholars Dolores Tierney and Andrew Syder even define a more flexible mode of spectatorship due to the emergence of many performers in more actively engaging forms of culture (Syder and Tierney 2005: 45). In my opinion such a conclusion would be premature for Mexican Formula Pictures, particularly because the viewing context is only one aspect among others in the process of addressing spectators. However, the fact that many of the performers appeared on different stages, all of which offered viewers the possibility of active involvement, must be taken into consideration.

Ill. 102: In the photo taken at the *Victoria,* a Latino theater in Texas, run by the Ruenes family, the audience awaits the screening.

The 'Low Quality/Bad Taste' Discourse

Mexican Formula Pictures, just like the *India María* films, are embedded within a variety of discourses. This is important because discourses play a crucial role in spectators' attribution of meaning to cultural texts. In the following paragraphs, I seek to explain how the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse is more generally constituted in the realm of Mexican Formula Pictures.

As previously mentioned, Foucault redefined discourse not primarily as language (as did Saussure (1993) and other semiotic scholars) but as a system of representations or, better yet, ways of structuring knowledge in a precise historical context. His goal was to link language to practice and combine what one says (language) with what one does (practice) (Hall 2001: 44, 72). Furthermore, discourse constructs topics and it governs the ways in which these are talked about at a certain historic moment (Hall 2001: 72).When analyzing discourse in Foucault's sense one should consider rules (which govern what is sayable and thinkable about a topic at a certain point in time), subjects, authority, statements, and practices (Hall 2001: 73, 74).

With regard to Mexican Formula Pictures, numerous discourses are in play. First and foremost, Mexican Formula Pictures are embedded in the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse. Whereas 'low quality' is mostly used to describe the characteristics of Mexican Formula Pictures as the result of a certain production mode, 'bad taste' is commonly used when referring to the spectators who watch and enjoy Mexican Formula Pictures. However, the terms are often employed interchangeably. I speak of the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse, which incorporates both aspects. Depending on the perspective stressed, I will emphasize either production quality or viewers' taste.

Similar to the *India María* films, I consider Mexican Formula Pictures to possess what Bourdieu calls "low symbolic capital". *Symbolic* capital here refers to the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honor in the dialectic of knowledge and recognition (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993: 9). This attribution of "low symbolic capital" to Mexican Formula Pictures goes back to their aesthetic quality, which is judged as inferior with respect to frames of reference such as Hollywood or European cinema by a criticism industry composed of journalists, politicians, producers, exhibitors and archives. The Mexican film historian and critic Paco Ignacio Taibo, for instance, states in an article in *Los Angeles Times Magazine* on Mexican Formula Pictures: "Mexican good taste is being poisoned by those producers who impose horrific, crude films on the viewing audience" (Goldin / Cooper 1986). With this statement, he expresses the view of many critics who distinguish between 'high-quality' films, which are often associated with Mexico's Golden Age, and 'low-quality' films, namely Mexican Formula Pictures.

Critics also commonly depict an image of the viewer as the victim of 'bad-quality' films. Journalists and critics were not alone in shaping the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse around Mexican Formula Pictures: politicians, particularly President Luís Echeverría (1970–1976) held private producers responsible for what he considered a proliferation of low-quality films. Echeverría's castigation in a speech in 1975 makes his stance clear: "They [the private producers] seem to me to have intervened in the film industry as in a factory of some product or in banking, without any feeling for general cultural interest" (Pérez Turrent and Turner 1982: 207–09). Both, the attribution of low quality and the accusation against producers, structure the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse.

Additionally, scholars have corroborated such notions in their research. In a study of border cinema, for instance, Iglesias observed a change in the attitude of producers between the Golden Age (until approximately the late 1940s) and the period of Mexican Formula Pictures (late 1960s to late 1980s) (Iglesias 1991: 69):

> Al parecer hace unos años el productor y realizador se sentían orgullosos de hacer cine nacional, se sentían parte del público, por lo que podían decir "produzco para mí o para nosotros". [...] ahora encontramos un abismo entre ellos y nosotros…

> It seems that a few years back producers and directors were proud to make national [Mexican] cinema, they felt they were part of the public and therefore they could say, "I produce for myself or for all of us" [...] now there is a gap between them and us…

While some scholars, politicians and critics held producers responsible for the low symbolic capital of their work — thereby making them the subjects embodying the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse — producers hardly countered the accusations that their cultural products possessed a low level of symbolic capital. They reasoned that spectators were responsible for the lack of quality. The private producer Raúl Ramírez declared (cit. in Díaz et al. 2008: 12):

> El pueblo no merece nada bueno. Quiere basura y eso le damos. Estás películas [Mexican Formula Pictures] dejan dinero y por eso las hacemos.
>
> The masses don't deserve anything good. They want trash and that is what we are giving them. These films [Mexican Formula Pictures] generate revenues and this is why we produce them.

Ramírez' statement is not only harsh in its judgment, but it also makes spectators of Mexican Formula Pictures subjects embodying the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse by possessing a low cultural capital.[104]

Scholars' and producers' notion of spectators as the subjects of 'low quality/bad taste' discourse is further reinforced by practices within certain institutions, including theatergoing. As outlined in Part I, in the 1960s and 1970s Hollywood fare and European films were mostly watched by people belonging to the middle class, who went to see films at the nicer movie houses, the so-called *cines de primera.* Mexican Formula Pictures, on the other hand, were screened at second-class movie theaters with a public from the lower classes. Through this division exhibitors contributed to the structuring of the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse.

So far I have shown for Mexican Formula Pictures that practices, statements and subjects constitute the "low quality/bad taste" discourse. How do rules about the 'sayable' and 'thinkable' as well as about authority act as elements of discourse, as proposed by Foucault? With respect to rules, it can be generally stated that Mexican Formula Pictures are talked about as products with low symbolic capital that require a low cultural capital to appropriate them. To make assumptions about what has been sayable and thinkable about them across time is a highly complex question. Nevertheles, I note that Mexican film critics and cultural critics possess a certain discursive authority due to their knowledge of film culture; they are primarily the ones who discuss and criticize culture in the media. From the emergence of Mexican Formula Pictures to this day, their authority has largely persisted and some viewers

[104] Cultural capital, in contrast to symbolic capital, describes forms of knowledge, dispositions and competences within consumers of cultural goods (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993: 9).

share the view that Mexican Formula Pictures are 'bad', as the findings of my interviews illustrate. In recent years, however, audiences have begun to repeatedly question the authority of film reviewers and cultural critics by actively engaging in the discouses at play.

Mexican Formula Pictures have experienced multiple reception modes, depending on how they have been integrated into the discourse. At times, they have been labelled as trash, cult or paracinema. These terms all describe strategies for re-evaluating pre-existing notions of taste and are primarily defined by how spectators reinterpret films with negative attributions (Cartmell et al. 1997: 3; Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson 2004; Hickethier 2000: 24; Jancovich 2002; Jancovich et al. 2003b; Le Guern 2004: 3; Sconce 1995: 535; Sontag 1999: 53). [105] Some people interviewed for this study even regard Mexican Formula Pictures as a form of counterculture resisting the dominant forces of power. However, it must be mentioned that viewers of Mexican Formula Pictures do not necessarily challenge pre-existing notions of 'low' quality or 'bad' taste; many of them simply enjoy watching the films and immersing themselves in the familiar stories. Viewers also rarely see themselves as a disruptive force in the cultural and intellectual marketplace, as is the case for cult movies or paracinema.

Reception Modes for Mexican Formula Pictures

Clearly, one of the aims of my research is to sketch out a grid for historically situated studies on Mexcian Formula Picture that carefully analyzes the ways they could be used and appropriated by viewers. In this conclusion, it is my goal to outline such a grid of reception modes, derived from the analysis of my case study. Clearly, I will not provide a list of all possibly imaginable receptions, because this would primarily lead to confusion.

Mexican Formula Pictures, similar to *India María* films, mostly proffer four different reception modes which are constituted by the factors articulated above and previously

[105] These concepts are based on the assumption that spectators do not simply enjoy watching films or television shows categorized as 'bad;' instead, reinterpretations are a means of expressing spectators' resistance to predominant notions of taste. Despite similarities and the fact that the terms 'cult', 'paracinema' and 'trash' are often used interchangeably, slight differences exist. 'Cult films' are often defined by their subcultural ideology regarding filmmakers, films or spectators as being in opposition to the mainstream, which is imagined as lower-middle-class conformity (Jancovich et al. 2003b: 1). 'Trash' generally describes a category of films that have either been explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture (Sconce 1995: 535). Other film scholars place trash within the realm of post structuralism, building on the assertion that individuals construct rather than receive meaning (Cartmell et al. 1997: 2). Lastly, 'paracinema' is described by Sconce as a particular reading protocol, "a counter aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus" (Sconce 1995: 535). Sconce stresses that paracinema functions primarily through its ironic strategy and its aspiration to the status of a counter cinema, which seeks to promote alternative pre-existing visions of cinematic art by questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthetic discourses and by attacking the criteria used to define 'high-quality' films, so as to establish a film canon (Sconce 1995: 536).

outlined. First and foremost, spectators might use Mexican Formula Pictures to simply be entertained or forget about daily annoyances and worries. Secondly, Mexican Formula Pictures are a means to reflect on aspects of the national or diaspora identity. Thirdly, because Mexican Formula Pictures are often embedded within the discourse of 'low-quality/bad taste' films, they proffer affirmative or negating positionings within this discourse. I speak of a critical mode, when they are understood negatively and of an empowering mode, when understood positively. The empowering mode — the fourth and final mode — is diametrically opposed to the critical mode. For this reception, viewers attribute the films with positive traits and the potential to overcome and transgress existing social barriers. This reception is closely related to variables such as class and gender.

The proposed reception modes can never be understood as pure; rather, they need to be referred to as a heuristic theoretical grid, because viewers always appropriate media products according to their specific needs, which might differ from one screening to the next. At times, they even vary in the course of a single screening. Last but not least, I wish to point to the fact that the following explanations are rather generic; they are however a helpful means of taking a step back from the empirical level of investigation and makes it possible to draw more generic conclusions about the position of the spectator vis-à-vis Mexican Formula Pictures.

Entertaining

As shown, Mexican Formula Pictures combine the logic of attractions as described by Gunning (1986) with the logic of classical narration. This implies that spectators gain pleasure by diving into the narrative and enjoying the different — often straightforward — stories, and they seek entertainment and gain pleasures from the spectacles performed, e.g. the excessive display of bodies, the widely used insertion of routines, musical numbers or spectacular action scenes. Viewers, thus, can foreground productive pleasures (narrative) or evasive pleasures, focusing on the body (spectacles) during the reception process (Fiske 1995: 50).

The foregrounding of entertaining aspects is further favored by the exhibition form. Mexican Formula Pictures are not consumed silently; instead, the spectacles on screen literally seem to be transferred into the venues where the films are screened. Also, the collective experience plays a key role as a refuge from daily life in the city (Monsiváis 1994: 88f.). When pleasures are foregrounded both on and off screen, the films can be watched as pure entertainment. These generated pleasures might at times question power constellations or possess a certain degree of progressiveness.

When stressing aspects of entertainment, pleasures might also be generated by the quality of the films, which are, as outlined, embedded within the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse. Like the paracinema or trash films, Mexican Formula Pictures are at times

regarded as deviations from dominant forms of cinema denounced by various institutions such as film archives or critics. Viewers thus watch Mexican Formula Pictures by constantly focusing on aspects such as the acting that comes across as wooden or the obviousness of elements such as the excessive use of artificial blood. In these cases, pleasures are gained from the deviation from 'quality' films. In contrast to paracinema or trash films, I suggest that Mexican Formula Pictures are however not necessarily considered as a counter culture that aims at criticizing power structures, even though the discourse of 'low quality' always implies such elements.

One could even take the discourse of 'low-quality/bad taste' a step further and argue that Mexican Formula Pictures are symptomatic of Mexico's underdevelopment. Much like other Latin American formats, the films are entertaining because they underline Latin America's underdevelopment. The character *El Chavo del Ocho,* for instance, and the series he appears in function as satires of society by offering fantasies of underdevelopment, as the character totally embraces a notion of anti-progress, which Nasser claims is symptomatic for Latin America (Nasser 2008: 143, 58). One might be tempted to call such a reception ironic or, in Hall's terminology, oppositional. However, I refrain from using either one of the two terms, for they imply a 'dominant' or common reception. My reluctance to use the term 'oppositional' stems from the interviews that I conducted with producers and directors for this research. Over time, I have gradually come to the conclusion that most of them are aware of the pleasures that are gained from precisely the low quality of the films. Some of them even explicitly enhance aspects of 'low quality' in order to entertain spectators.

National and Diaspora Identity

In the reception process, spectators might stress aspects of national identity. More precisely, Mexicanness — a concept that was heavily promoted by the Mexican state after the Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century. One of main goals of the new concept was to unite a nation that was divided into indigenous groups and Spaniards. It served as a strategy to forge national solidarity and unity among populations divided by race, language and regional affiliations (Hershfield and Maciel 1999; Hershfield 1999). Film played a key role in promoting the concept, particularly because the revision of the concept of the nation coincided with the development of a striving film industry during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (Hershfield 1999: 81). Film thus became the main medium through which to celebrate national spirit. Consequently, during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, endless films presented noble Indians or cowboys who sang about the beauties of Mexico. Mexican music was a key element used in these films to foreground national characteristics. Similar claims could be made for Mexican Formula Pictures. One way of negotiating meaning for Mexican Formula Pictures could thus be by focusing on these positive national aspects, dwelling on the songs and appropriating Mexican Formula Pictures as a reassurance of national identity.

On the other hand, Mexican Formula Pictures might also proffer more critical receptions with respect to the national. This is due to various reasons. First of all, these films present a rather negative image of the country; in the wrestling films, wrestlers often fight against dangers within the country. In the border adventure stories, migrants need to flee across the border to the United States due to the bad economic situation in Mexico. The sexy movies present women who make a living by selling their bodies, and lastly, in the antihero comedies the main protagonist fights against everyday corruption or just simply tries to survive in a country that is depicted negatively. This negative concept of the nation might be further enhanced by the aesthetics of Mexican Formula Pictures, which are often times labeled as 'poorly crafted' by comparison with other films. Significantly, one could almost say that Mexican Formula Pictures proffer readings that dismantle the concept of Mexicanness. Such a reception might then again be reinforced by the venues at which Mexican Formula Pictures were screened. Significantly, the division of venues into first and second-class, but also the nicknames for movie theaters such as *pojito* (flea hole), clearly favor the idea of difference and not union within the Mexican nation, opposing to the idea of national unity. Also, it is crucial to mention that Mexico was going through extremely hard economic times during the boom of Mexican Formula Pictures. The national currency, the peso, suffered an almost uncontrollable devaluation and Mexico's debts increased constantly. The economic crisis might also have reinforced a critical positioning of viewers toward the celebration of national pride. It could be concluded that Mexican Formula Pictures might just as well encouraged the reception of Mexico as a dysfunctional nation.

At the same time, Mexican migrants residing in the United States have avidly consumed Mexican Formula Pictures. For this community, which was displaced and lived in the diaspora, the viewing context strongly determined reception. In fact, moviegoing fulfills manifold purposes for migrants; most importantly, it serves as a place to meet other migrants and create a shared sense of their *diaspora* situation (Naficy 2010) or it reinforced the *imagined community* (Anderson 2006). During screenings, the audience directly relates to and discusss the films exhibited, particularly the ones treating aspects of migration. At times, movie theaters were also used to share information about the procedure for obtaining a legal migrant status. This implies the exhibition form plays the most important part in reception in the *diaspora*.

Also at times, when displaced, receptions take place under the documentarizing mode, as described by Odin (1990a). In this case, the exhibition form or the author of the film is assumed to be real as well as to make propositions about the real and thereby become the institution determining the reading. This implies that when audiences share information about their migrant status, they are likely to link the discourse to their real lives. Also, cues on the filmic level are often seen as instructions of how to cross the border (Iglesias 1999). In this sense, films about issues related to migration trigger the diaspora reception mode through their themes. Most of the border films proffer such a

reading. But even films in the other categories of Mexican Formula Pictures might trigger such a reading, because they allude to memories of the homeland and allow migrants to luxuriate in the landscapes of their lost homeland, to bathe in the sounds of their language at the cinema or at home. Similarly when foregrounding national or diaspora aspects in the reception process, viewers join in with the well-known songs performed throughout the films, they dwell on the past and reflect on their own situation. The national and diaspora reception thus clearly stresses aspects of nostalgia — the longing for or glorifying of the homeland.

Finally, Mexican Formula Pictures can be used as artifacts of diaspora identities, as for instance that of Chicanos. Within the U.S. Mexican Formula Pictures are being reappropriated by a younger generation of Latinos as objects of pride, stressing the fact that they are products, aimed at the lower classes and embedded in the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse (Avalos 2009). In that sense, Mexican Formula Picutres are to be understood and appropriated as a sign of defiance for migrants who have succeeded in the United States and who can therefore be proud of what has been denounced as 'low-quality' culture.

Critical

Some viewers also have condemned Mexican Formula Pictures for their low quality. At an award ceremony for Mexican films, the internationally acclaimed director Gabriel Figueroa, for example, commented on the boom of Mexican Formula Pictures:

> Cheap cinema, with no artistic or cultural ambitions, a repetition of the oldest and most time-worn formulas, sub-pornography, facile folklore, routine melodramas, films aimed at manipulating the emotions and frustrations of the lower strata of the population and the nostalgia of Mexicans and of those of Mexican decent in the United States (in Pérez Turrent and Turner 1982: 201).

Here Figueroa epitomizes an attitude that was considered as widely accepted fact among critics in Mexico and constituted the 'low quality/bad taste' discourse. Mexican Formula Pictures are considered to be of 'bad quality' because of the repetition of story formulas, the films' aesthetic qualities, their obviousness and excessiveness, and the use of cliché characters. In addition, the films were deplored as to negatively depict gender and social roles. Also mentioned in the quote above, is the common understanding of the audience. For the critical reception mode, the audience is degraded as a passive mass which is easily manipulated, therefore has no means to make its own meaning out of these films. Within the Mexican context, the notion of the audience as passive manipulated victims has prevailed up into the late 1980s, even though reception studies already proposed a multifaceted understanding of consumers as active viewers using media products according to their own needs. In much the same way, exhibition venues — the second-class cinemas — were criticized as lacking in quality and having low standards of hygiene.

The critical reception of Mexican Formula Pictures by many critics and at times Mexico's political elite (including President Echeverría, for instance) not only resulted in a devaluation of the films and their audience but also had an effect on the writing of film history. Film critics and historians almost unanimously labeled the period during which Mexican Formula Pictures were booming as 'the crisis of Mexican cinema'. This might have contributed to the absence of research on these films, which prevails to this date.

Empowering

Diametrically opposed to the critical reception is the empowering reception, which should be contextualized within the theoretical notion of spectators as active individuals. Here films are understood and overtly marked as producerly texts (Fiske) with obvious and excessive elements such as nudity, extreme violence, slapstick performances or long wrestling scenes in which physical feats are excessively displayed. The obviousness and excessiveness of the films have, among other factors, led to the devaluation of Mexican Formula Pictures. The repeated affirmation of 'low-quality' discourse by Mexican film critics then contributed to the notion that their consumption, is harmful, or at least not desirable. Significantly, the watching of Mexican Formula Pictures might in itself, be seen as an act of resistance against the dominant notion of 'good/bad' taste. When categories of 'good/bad' taste are ignored or not cared about by viewers, the simple fact of ignoring might be seen as an act of resistance.

On the basis of a closer look at character types, the hypothesis of a resistant type of reception could even be taken a step further: In fact, at times the characters in the films foster fantasies of power through either their use of extreme violence, their mocking of authorities and the breaching of clearly defined stages. I have demonstrated my claim for the *India María* character and the empowering reception of her films with respect to gender and class. In much the same way as Velasco and her characterization of *La India María,* various other Mexican Formula characters and star performers also push the boundaries of gender and class definitions. Particularly interesting is the character *Lola La Trailera*, impersonated by the actress Rosa Gloria Chagoyán, who appears in numerous border action films.[106] The pleasures of empowerment fantasies garnered by viewers from Chagoyán's character and star image are akin to those outlined previously for *La India María* and Velasco. Significantly, these two example receptions are not unique to Mexican Formula Pictures. Much to the contrary, film scholar Tina Vares goes so far as to suggest that all violent women on screen have the potential to trigger such fantasies (Vares 2001: 238, 39). Studies of blaxploitation films have taken a similar angle, arguing that films with action heroines favor alternative reception practices and readings (Dunn 2008; Holmlund 2005; Keeling 2007; Sims 2006). According to Fiske, the pleasure experienced in these cases would be productive,

[106] For an introduction of her character, see page 28ff.

because they play with the fantasy of female power. Mexican Formula Pictures could thus be seen as projected fulfillments of what is desired and absent within the status quo. Thereby they clearly nourish dreams of upward mobility and encourage struggle for social transformation. The empowering reception of characters such as *Lola* or *La India María* as in many Mexican Fomula Pictures, are based on the transgression of stereotyped gender roles. Even though my main object of research, Velasco impersonating *La India María*, plays with gendered stereotypes, her character deviates from the ones embodied by her colleagues. Velasco chooses for the most part to desexualize her character both through her modest apparel and through the use and appropriations of objects and actions as well as by acrobatic slapstick normally attributed to the opposite sex. Thereby she aligns herself with aspects of masculinity that are empowering, like independency and prowess. Interestingly, she does this by disengaging from her gendered position as an object of the gaze. Much in the same way other Mexican Formula Pictures characters such as *El Chavo del Ocho* might foster an empowering reception; however, the focus here lies on the rupture with class membership.

Lastly, the empowering reception is favored by the viewing context. Evidetly, parallels exist between the viewing of Mexican Formula Pictures and the viewing of home movies. Most importantly, meaning is actively constructed and constantly reassured through talk in the audience. This might seem rather farfetched, but the meta-talking and the reassuring of audience members as well as the repeated viewing are practices that are used during the viewing of home movies and Mexican Formula Pictures alike. In the group viewing process, viewers constantly reassure each other and thereby favor an empowering reception.

For the purposes of analyzing the reception modes of Mexcian Formula Pictures, it is crucial to analyze the interplay and scope of determining factors relevant to reception practices in order to fully understand how viewers make sense of the films and, at the same time, participate in the creation of meaning. As I stated at the beginning of this dissertation, it was my aim to contribute to reception studies by presenting a case study, which allowed conclusions to be drawn on a theoretical level. I believe that this aim is accomplished regardless of the difficulty and danger that these conclusions remain general when grounded mainly on a single case study. Despite the drawbacks and shortcomings of my research, I believe it is, nonetheless, a good start and hope it has the potential to inspire further investigation and new research projects.

Even though it extends far beyond my research, I would also be interested in assessing parallels between Mexican Formula Pictures and films with resembling aesthetic features and story formulas from different countries and time periods. Some interesting similarity exist with Nigerian mainstream cinema, called *Nollywood*, as well as Brazil's parodies and sexy movies of the 1970s, the *Pornochanchadas*. Though I have observed

resemblances in their production mode, exhibition practices as well as reception such a claim would have to be verified carefully

Part IV: Mexican Formula Pictures Today

In this concluding part I explore what has become of Mexican Formula Pictures. For that purpose, I look at various films and television formats produced in recent years bearing parallels to Mexican Formula Pictures. The Chicano filmmaker Robert Rodriguez and his latest feature MACHETE (US, 2010) will be particularly highlighted due to the many similarities and obvious references to Mexican Formula Pictures. By comparison with the reception of the *India María* films, I suggest that MACHETE offers different readings, each foregrounding particular elements that range from the pleasure of seeing bodies on the screen to the production mode.

The End of a Production Mode and New Forms

The production of Mexican Formula Pictures did not come to a sudden stop at the end of the 1980s, but a gradual decline in the production volume became evident in the early 1990s. Mexican scholars have argued that the films no longer attracted enough moviegoers because of the repetition of stories or simply because the audiences preferred Hollywood films (R. Agrasánchez 2006: 36; García Canclini and Holtz 1994: 187; Valenzuela Arce 1994: 322). Even though this might be at least partially true, I argue that the decrease in production was primarily caused by Mexico's economic crisis and the high inflation rate during the 1980s, which made film production and consumption an increasingly pricey undertaking, especially because Mexico's film industry was largely dependent on U.S. stocks and technologies. Nevertheless, some companies and stars continued to make films, among them my main case study María Elena Velasco, who completed her latest feature LA HIJA DE MOCTEZUMA in 2012. Others tried to supplement their income with commercials and launched their own products. For instance, the performer Pedro Fernández, whose stage name is composed of 'Pedro' Infante and Vicente 'Fernández', designed his own tequila brand "*solo para machos*" (for men only), reaffirming his image of a womanizer. Together with the tequila, he launched his new album (Orso 2001).

Despite additional efforts, the companies and performers who continued to make Mexican Formula Pictures couldn't keep up the previous pace of production; all of them had to increase their production intervals. Overall, in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s producing Mexican Formula Pictures became more expensive and yielded lower revenues, which ultimately led to the end of a productive phase. Despite the decrease in numbers of moviegoers, the consumption of Mexican Formula Pictures on television

and at home as pirated copies has remained popular even to this day (García Canclini and Holtz 1994: 179).

On Television: Chespirito and Ugly Betty

Some Mexican Formula Picture characters and their performers have continued their careers exclusively on television. The most prominent example is probably *Chespirito* with his two characters *El Chavo del Ocho* — a typical young Mexican orphan — and *El Chapulín Colorado*, the embodiment of an antihero. In recognition of his success, *Chespirito* received an honorary doctorate in El Salvador, and the Mexican president Vicente Fox (2000–2006) dedicated a series of postage stamps to *El Chapulín* and *El Chavo del Ocho* (Nasser 2008: 126).

Concurrently, new characters and serial formats emerged on television. Some of them bear obvious parallels to Mexican Formula Pictures in terms of aesthetics, character traits or the repetition of formulas. The *telenovela* YO SOY BETTY LA FEA / UGLY BETTY (Fernando Gaitán, CO, 1999–2001) and its sequel ECO MODA (Mario Ribero Ferreira, CO, 2001–2002) bear various similarities to the *India María* films and television series. First and foremost, the *telenovela* has reached vast audiences across Latin America and within the United States. According to the trade journal *Variety*, when first aired it reached over 80 million viewers across Latin America alone (Sutter 2001: 54). After the success of the Spanish version, a Philippine version, a French, a German and other language versions were produced and aired in the following years.

The stories all center on a hard-working, intelligent woman, *Betty*, who is employed as the personal assistant of the editor of a beauty magazine. Just like *La India María*, *Betty* is clumsy, doesn't dress like a businesswoman, and in the version aired across the United States she comes from a Latino background, which automatically marks her as to belonging to a marginal group in terms of her ethnicity and class. The *telenovela's* theme revolves around the question of female 'beauty' and 'ugliness'. The opening credits already show close-ups of female body parts such as eyes, lips, mouth, etc. Images of 'beautiful' women are interwoven with images of *Betty*, who stands out as the other — or as the ugly; she wears braces, has facial hair, and her eyebrows are thicker than the norm. The depiction of *Betty* and her other 'ugly' friends who also work for the company raise a set of questions much like those posed by the *India María* films, centering on aspects of race, class, and power constellations.


Ill. 103 and Ill. 104: Similarly to *La India María*, *Betty* in the *telenovela* YO SOY BETTY (1999–2001) is depicted as the other. She constantly becomes the object of ridicule by her 'beautiful' co-workers. In the end, however, she succeeds as a businesswoman.

The film scholar Yeidy M. Rivero has examined the reception of the *telenovela* YO SOY BETTY LA FEA by using two focus groups of Latinas with different ethnic backgrounds, all living in the United States. The women in the two groups discussed aspects of the construction of femininity, in particular aspects of beauty, and expressed what they liked/disliked about the *telenovela*. In addition, Rivero included comments from blogs and chat rooms, in which English and Spanish speakers discussed the *telenovela*'s narrative and characters; some users even embraced the *telenovela*'s jargon (Rivero 2003: 65). Most of the women agreed that *Betty* does not correspond to the common notions of beauty, her skin is darker and she is from the lower end of the social scale. At the same time, her body is not hyper-sexual/sensual — a common depiction of Latina women (Rivero 2003: 67). This corresponds to my findings of the reception of *La India María*. Rivero states that all the participants of the focus groups found pleasure in the depiction of *Betty* because she represented an alternative to dominant depictions of Latina women. Rivero also notes that the depiction of *Betty's* otherness clearly offered counter readings (Rivero 2003: 68). However, in the *telenovela* the dominant notion of beauty, in which the white female body is considered beautiful, is never transgressed, and in the end *Betty* is transformed into a 'beautiful' woman; her braces are removed, her eyebrows are plucked and she is provided with new fashionable clothes. Her transformation ultimately leads to her professional success and allows her to become the president of the company.

Rivero's study shows that *Betty's* development clearly feeds the viewers' fantasies of empowerment, which generate pleasure, particularly for Latina viewers. Significantly, it pleased the women that the character overcomes the common Latin American categories of womanhood as either sacred virgins or whores. However, *Betty* never challenges the existing power constellations; instead, she plays according to their rules (Rivero 2003: 73). Rivero's study of the reception of YO SOY BETTY LA FEA clearly points to parallels to the reception of the *India María* films and more generally to Mexican Formula Pictures. It would be highly interesting to deepen the discussion of

the numerous parallels between the two characters, *La India María* and *Betty*, for further research.

Mexican Formula Pictures Reloaded

Yet another tendency is exemplified by the new forms of Mexican Formula Pictures that have evolved since the late 1990s. In fact, numerous films, which continue to flourish among Latinos in the United States, closely resemble Mexican Formula Pictures in terms of their production mode, story formulas or characters. Few of them are exhibited at theaters; instead, they are produced straight to DVD. Many of these films minutely recycle scripts and characters from Mexican Formula Pictures. The film LA DEL MOÑO COLORADO / THE GIRL WITH THE COLORED HAIR KNOB (José Antonio Chávez, MX, 1998), for instance, clearly alludes to the character and adventures of *La India María*. It tells the story of an indigenous peasant girl who moves to the city to make a living. Overwhelmed by the city's hectic pace such as the traffic, the clumsy peasant girl maneuvers herself into numerous adventures. Not only could the story be from an *India María* film, but also the character is dressed identically to *La India María* and the actress even imitates the character's tone of voice, accents and lines of dialogue.

Ill. 105 and Ill. 106: The film LA DEL MOÑO COLORADO (1998) copies previously released *India María* films, ranging from the character, to setting, and dialog lines.

Other films are no longer set in Mexico, but instead they tell the adventures of Latinos living in the United States. A good example includes TORTILLAS AGAIN (Raúl and Sergio Ramírez, US, 2006). The story takes places in Los Angeles and is about a Latino family who struggles to survive. They play the lottery hoping to improve their financial situation. One day, they picked the lucky numbers, but unfortunately the lottery ticket is lost and it accidently ends up in a homemade tortilla. In the end, the family realizes that money alone doesn't make them happy. Although all dialog lines are in English and only the music and some catch phrases are in Spanish, the look of the film strongly reminds of Mexican Formula Pictures.

A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN (US, 2004) by Sergio Arau is yet another example for what has become of Mexican Formula Pictures. This film plays with the fantasy of what would happen if all Mexican workers suddenly disappeared from the state of California. It shows the striking effects of the absence of the Mexican population; the trash is no longer collected, children are left without care, and soon the state finds itself in total chaos. Similarly, the film NACHO LIBRE (US, 2006) by Jared Hess distributed by the company Paramount alludes to the antihero comedies of Mexican Formula Pictures, but provides a contemporary setting within the United States. Ignacio (played by Jack Black), a cook at a monastery, transforms himself at night into a *luchador* wearing tight pants. To save the orphanage run by the monastery, the hero Nacho challenges Mexico's most fearsome wrestlers. Both NACHO LIBRE and A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN are available in Spanish and English, whereas the Mexican Formula Pictures were commonly only available in Spanish. The availability of both languages clearly points to their aim of reaching wider audiences. Thus, these films allude to the Mexican Formula Pictures, but at the same time they aim at Anglo audiences.

Lastly, one of today's most prolific straight-to-DVD producers and directors, who should be considered in future research, is Aurora Martínez. To this day, Martínez continues to work with star performers known since the emergence of Mexican Formula Pictures in the late 1960s and early 1970s such as the Almada brothers. She has produced over 70 films throughout her career, most of them depicting extreme violence. Like María Elena Velasco, she is one of the few women in the business. Martínez as well as all of the other films, television series mentioned deserve to be analyzed more carefully. I hope that future research will shed some light on these films.

Mexican Formula Pictures Become Mainstream: Rodriguez in the Limelight

To conclude, I more closely examine the director and producer Robert Rodriguez, and in particular his latest film, MACHETE (2010), an outstanding example of how Mexican Formula Pictures have influenced the cinema of today. More precisely, MACHETE has evoked receptions comparable to those of Mexican Formula Pictures for which spectators either focus on the physical experience of the film, reflect on aspects of Latino identity, enjoy the entertaining nature of the film or rejoice in characters' success through their rise into a higher social class. First however, I would like to turn the attention to the image of the director conveyed in paratexts and his mode of production, because numerous parallels exist to Mexican Formula Pictures. In contrast to Part II, in which I sketch out the reception modes of the *India María* films, the following remarks are not based on interviews with recipients. Instead, they are grounded within theory and film analysis. Nevertheless, various parallels can be observed between the reception of Rodriguez' and Velasco's films.

Rodriguez' Low-Budget Production Mode

From the beginning of his career, Rodriguez, who is of Mexican descent and was born in Texas, has presented and positioned himself as an independent rebel and a producer of low-budget films. At the beginning of his career, Rodriguez regarded the production mode of low-budget Mexican films as the only possibility open to him of producing a feature film. That is how he hit upon the idea of making a border action film for the Spanish-language video market. Rodriguez borrowed numerous VHS films from the local Latino video rental shop and set himself the goal of making something alike, only better and cheaper (Rodriguez 1995: 6–7). The result was Rodriguez' first low-budget film production, EL MARIACHI (MX/US, 1992). It cost exactly $7,000 and was financed with money the director had earned as a test subject for the pharmaceutical industry (Rodriguez 1995: 10). Rodriguez took on the sole responsibility for the directing, production, camera, special effects and editing of the film. With the production mode of Mexican Formula Pictures as his model, he recruited the actors and props within his circle of friends and his 13-member family. Although Rodriguez originally wanted to sell the film directly on video, Columbia Pictures unexpectedly took EL MARIACHI into its distribution system. When the film won the audience prize at the *Sundance Film Festival*, its Latino director, who was 23 years old at the time, stepped into the limelight. He had proved that films can be made even with a very limited budget and a small team, and with his do-it-yourself attitude he gave fresh momentum to independent filmmakers in the USA (Horsley 1999: 249-70).[107] However, the media never connected his first film, EL MARIACHI, with Mexican Formula Pictures, even though the parallels in terms of the production mode, the story and the characters are actually unmistakable.

To this date, only the Texan film professor Charles Ramírez Berg has compared Rodriguez' films with the Mexican low-budget tradition. In his book *Latino Images in Film* (2002) he refers to possible connections between Rodriguez' works and the tradition of Mexican low-budget productions. But Rodriguez himself has never denied the connection. On the contrary, his remarks in his book *Rebel without a Crew* (1995), as well as his self-representation as a 'laborer' show numerous similarities with the self-image of Mexican Formula Picture producers. His book — a compilation of diary entries written during the filming of EL MARIACHI — and his *Ten Minute Film Schools* (clips produced to this date), in which he addresses amateur filmmakers and gives them advice, both have one main goal: to demystify filmmaking and thereby demonstrate that anyone can realize the dream of making a film, even without money, if with creativity. Rodriguez stresses the point that a lack of formal training is not an obstacle, presenting himself as the best example of that. On account of his poor grades, he was originally not accepted as a student by the film school he applied to (Rodriguez 1995: xi). In this respect, Rodriguez can also be compared favorably with the makers of Mexican

[107] For more information on his role in the U.S. independent scene, see also *Last Rites/Last Kicks: The Rodriguez Syndrome* (Mottram 2006: 87-99).

Formula Pictures, because they too had no formal training and instead learned their skills on the set. In the context of the American film industry, Rodriguez' working method and his insistence on low-budget production are unusual or even rebellious, but his attitude can be interpreted somewhat differently if kept in mind that he originally modeled his film on Mexican low-budget films. As I have mentioned, Mexican Formula Pictures were produced in locations including southern Texas, because the family businesses had more leeway there. Instead of hiring professionals who were entitled to wages determined by law, they could use their friends and relatives. The producer, director, actors and bookkeeper were all related, and often one person was responsible for several functions. The shooting usually took place on the family property, where the team also was accommodated, or they used external locations in southern Texas. The production times were kept very short.[108] These conditions were similar to the ones under which Rodriguez made his films.

Even though the budgets for Rodriguez' films continually increased after the success of EL MARIACHI, the former rebel never gave up the low-budget production mode which involved his extended family. He has produced many of his films through his own production company. To this date, he continues to do the editing, sound tracks and special effects himself in his garage. Hence, the low-budget production mode is still an important part of Rodriguez' image today. He misses no opportunity to emphasize this, and likes to present himself in scenes of daily activities, which create a sense of closeness between himself and the viewer. For example, on the DVD of ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO (Robert Rodriguez, US, 2003) he takes spectators on a tour of his house, the place where he lives and works. He repeatedly stresses how simple and relatively inexpensive his productions are by demonstrating individual simplified work processes on the spot. In particular, he emphasizes his sense of closeness to the spectator by addressing the camera directly ("From my home to your home") and confirms his statement by adding, "Home is where the dreams are." In this way he makes it clear that producing his films with the help of his family was not merely a response to the pressure of necessity, but rather a choice. The DVD of ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO also includes a ten-minute cooking lesson in which Rodriguez shows how to make the traditional Mexican dish *Puerco Pibil (*a porc roast*)*. Rodriguez holds the camera in his hand, filming himself while he cooks. This segment is very entertaining. Moreover, Rodriguez' paratexts, especially the cooking lesson generate a sense of intimacy between Rodriguez and the spectator, so that the spectator is not simply an observer, but given the feeling that he or she belongs to Rodriguez' 'family'. In this way as well, Rodriguez positions himself in the same way as María Elena Velasco and other Mexican Formula Picture performers, for whom closeness to the audience is the key to success.

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[108] For a more detailed outline of the characteristics of the Mexican Formula Picture production mode see page 51.

Ill. 107: Rodriguez shows the viewers how to make a traditional Mexican dish.

For spectators who, like Rodriguez, are of Mexican or Latin American descent, the 'do it yourself' production mode in the border region between the USA and Mexico and its re-staging point to the context of Mexican Formula Pictures. Multiple elements thus reflect the experience of many Latinos in the USA and are important components of their diaspora identity: The production between two national contexts, within the family circle and with the house as the center of daily life, as well as the prominence of Mexican food and the credo that with hard work you can go far even if you don't have much money.

A Trailer Becomes a Feature Film

Rodriguez' positioning as a doer who is seeking contact with a broad audience by staging everyday events was also the basic precondition of his latest film, MACHETE (2010). The audience and his fans already played a key role in the development story. MACHETE was originally simply one of five low-budget trailers for nonexistent films, which were shown for the exploitation double bill consisting of *Planet Terror* (US, 2007, Robert Rodriguez) and *Death Proof* (US, 2007, Quentin Tarantino). The trailers, which announce up-coming attractions, were one of the elements in the reconstruction of an authentic grindhouse experience. The trailer for MACHETE actually already tells and shows everything that is central in the feature-length film. The Mexican day laborer *Machete* is hired by corrupt American politicians to commit a murder. For a large sum

of money, he is supposed to kill a U.S. political candidate who advocates a restrictive policy regarding immigrants. A crooked game is being played: *Machete*, the migrant without a work permit, is stigmatized as a scapegoat, and this initially lends new momentum to the conspiracy between Mexican and American politicians and drug lords. But the day laborer *Machete* upsets their plans: as a former police officer, who resisted to give in to corrupt machinations in Mexico, he refuses to go along with the murder plot and starts out on a brutal course of revenge. As the voice-over on the trailer succinctly puts it, "They just fucked with the wrong Mexican!"


Ill. 108 and Ill. 109: In the film MACHETE (2010), similarly to many Mexican Formula Pictures, the focus is on the body as a spectacle.

In the tradition of the exploitation film, the spectator is promised action, strong emotions and excitement. The trailer also delivers a few samples of the visual spectacle. Blood spurts in slow motion from gunshot wounds, a bush knife flies directly at the camera, and the main character, *Machete*, sails through the air on a motorcycle, shooting his gun, as everything goes up in flames in the background. The physicality of the figures is emphasized throughout the trailer. In addition to the visual spectacles, the quality of the camerawork is also very much in the style of Mexican Formula Pictures: the colors appear at different levels of intensity, many scenes are either overlighted or underlighted, and the video and audio tracks are marked by numerous disturbance sources such as white stripes or steady flickering. According to the director, Rodriguez, the audience enjoyed the trailer for MACHETE so much that they insisted that he expand it into a feature-length film. Once again, Rodriguez wanted to focus on a simple man who becomes a superhero. However, this time the hero would be a migrant. As he did in his earlier films, especially in his first work, EL MARIACHI, in MACHETE Rodriguez reverts to a formulaic narrative, excessive spectacle and, as has already been mentioned, a production mode that was inspired by Mexican Formula Pictures. The aesthetic quality of the film is probably the most striking difference between the trailer and the feature film, as well as between the film and the classic Mexican Formula Pictures. In addition, the cast consists of American stars such as Robert De Niro and the Latina diva Jessica Alba.

Playing with the Formula

In the following paragraphs, I take a closer look at the film MACHETE and investigate how it addresses the spectator via the narrative and the staging of bodies. Like Rodriguez' earlier films EL MARIACHI (1992), its remake DESPERADO (US, 1995) and the sequel ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO (2003), MACHETE (2010) is devoted to the successful transnational formula of the fighter-adventure movie which ultimately inspired the subcategory of Mexican Formula Pictures, the border films. In their basic narrative structure, the films are oriented along the lines of blockbusters such as RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD (Ted Kotcheff, US, 1982), and always choose the border region between the USA and Mexico, as a setting. Thus Rodriguez' films, like Mexican Formula Pictures, must be regarded as variations of the basic formula. In his book about the staging of Latinos as stereotypes, Ramírez Berg shows how EL MARIACHI remains true to the narrative patterns of the fighter-adventure movie, but repeatedly plays with deviations from the formula (Ramírez Berg 2002: 227-39). I am formulating a similar hypothesis regarding MACHETE, orienting my analysis to the formula proposed by Ramírez Berg.

At the center of the fighter-adventure formula, there is always a male protagonist with physical abilities that make him unique. His struggle is altruistic in nature, and he never acts without a motivation. His ultimate goal is to ensure that justice is done, and in the process he is repeatedly put to the test. In the end, there is always a spectacular duel between the hero and the antagonist. MACHETE functions according to the outlined formula. The main character, *Machete* (Danny Trejo), is tall, muscular and especially agile in his use of his bush knife. When drug lords and politicians try to exploit the hero, he defends himself against the corruption and fights for justice. As he does so, he ultimately questions the national boundary between Mexico and the USA — in fact, he even calls for its abolition. In the final showdown, he ultimately fights with two machetes against the meanest of the villain, who once again sums up the filmic formula during the duel: "You went for the honor and I went for the power… I am the bad guy!"

In spite of its faithfulness to the formulas, MACHETE uses variations and exaggerations that make it stand out from other fighter-adventure movies. First and foremost, the hero is not white, as usual, but a Latino. This is manifested through physical characteristics such as the color of his skin and his cultural behaviors, such as his accent or actions which also reflect his social status. His weapon, the machete, which gives both the character and the film their names, is also clearly rooted in Latin America. The bush knife, a tool used by the poor peasants of Latin America, is unambiguously related to the theme of labor. The same is true for the main protagonist, who is looking for work when he gets caught up in the whirlpool of corruption. A central aspect is the fact that he does not have a work permit and is therefore categorized by his antagonists as powerless. While the character of the 'oppressed worker' is rather unusual in the context of the fighter-adventure film, there is a tradition in Mexican Formula Pictures of

characters who seem to be defenseless at first because of their social status. Examples include *Cantinflas*, who embodied the stereotype of the uneducated Mexican and my maine case study, the character *La India María* who is primarily defined by her status as a street vendor or a domestic servant. In MACHETE — as in its Mexican counterparts — the definition of the hero by means of work repeatedly provides opportunities for humorous punch lines. For example, *Machete*, disguised as a cleaner or a gardener, sneaks unnoticed into the residences of the powerful. He transforms ordinary tools such as a hoe or a mop into weapons. This carries his sense of justice to the extreme: *Machete* kills only the 'bad guys'; he uses his 'weapons of the oppressed' to move all of the others, such as the bodyguards, out of the way as gently as he can without hurting them.

Ill. 110: As a Latino carrying garden tools, *Machete* sneaks unnoticed into the houses of the powerful.

Ill. 111: The fighter Luz as the driving force in the struggle.

Another aspect that deviates from the formula is the fact that *Machete* is not the only hero of the film. The tacos vendor Luz, who operates a network for migrants behind the scenes, soon turns out to be a revolutionary who knows how to defend her principles with weapons. And even her initial antagonist, the Latina employee of the immigration bureau, changes sides when she gets wind of the political mess. Instead of using a gun, however, she vanquishes her enemies with her high-heeled shoes. The two heroines thus do not simply seduce people with their physical charms — as it is usual in the genre — but push the action forward instead. Their entry into spheres that are dominated by men, such as revolution and the struggle against existing power structures, are ways to break with the conventional victim role. Also, the main character, *Machete*, is not fighting solo — he is fighting as a member of a collective. The final showdown therefore goes beyond the duel between the drug mogul and *Machete* and becomes a spectacular mass battle between Latino migrants and their sympathizers on the one hand and a band of radical American nationalists on the other hand.

Ill. 112: The hero *Machete* does not operate alone: his campaign of vengeance against corruption becomes a collective struggle for the rights of the border crossers.

MACHETE addresses the spectator by means of the formulaic narrative, which clearly guides the spectator's sympathies toward the hero and legitimizes his campaign of vengeance. Spectators share the tension and excitement the hero is feeling, as the genre requires and they understand his goals and his conflicts. However, the breaks and variations I have mentioned distort the focus, particularly the shift away from the solo hero to an ensemble of characters. This ensemble, in turn, is pursuing an idealistic goal, namely the rebellion against the oppression of migrants and the questioning of economic and political borders.

Excess and Attractions

MACHETE goes beyond with the narrative limits of the fighter-adventure formula. Primarily manifested in the physicality of the characters portrayed, it surpasses all of the films produced by Rodriguez, by the means of its visual excesses and the myriad of attractions it presents. In MACHETE, gallons of blood are shed, body parts are hacked off and nakedness is displayed as a spectacle. In the case of Mexican Formula Pictures, especially the *India María* films, I have explained how the excessive presentations of bodies are appropriated as sources of pleasure or as a form of critique. An explanation that bases its arguments solely on fascination would be inadequate. I propose to also interpret the excessive emphasis on physicality in the film MACHETE by considering the film's context in the Mexican-American border region.

The emphasis on the body in the border adventure films — a category of Mexican Formula Pictures — is not coincidental, but it grounds in certain realities of everyday life in the border region. For example, human bodies serve as a means of transport to smuggle drugs, prostitutes offer their bodies as a commodity, illegal immigrants flee

through the desert across the border with a tremendous expenditure of physical energy, and may even not survive. Human organs are sold, and bodies are destroyed after they killed. In MACHETE Rodriguez deliberately pushes this emphasis on the body to its limits or takes it to absurd lengths. Excessive representations of the body follow one another in rapid succession, and it seems as if each of these images is trying to outdo the last. One could even suppose that the director's declared aim is to shock the viewers, shake them up and make them aware of the problems in the border region. However, such a conclusion would be too one-dimensional, because the combination of border issues and excessive presentations of the body do indeed force spectators to confront such problems, but, as I've already mentioned, the excessive images also evoke the viewers' fascination. I assume that the reduction of bodies to their material qualities blocks out the spiritual and moral characteristics of the characters, and satisfies the need for so-called 'evasive pleasure'. In other words, this reduction makes the body a place where existing power structures that are written in and on the body are negotiated (Fiske 1995). For the film MACHETE this would mean that the excessive representations of the body fascinate spectators and satisfy their desire for evasive pleasure, but at the same time also direct their attention to social values and the questioning of them. In the latter case, the power status of legal/illegal or corrupted/not corrupted characters is critically examined. Nonetheless, the film is not simply a reflection of border realities and bodies; but instead, they only depict extreme situations.

Spectators do not construct meanings exclusively on the basis of the film as a text — that is, on the basis of its narration, characters and representations of bodies. The viewing context also plays a key role. Significantly, the DVD of MACHETE includes an additional version of the film which presents the background noise of an audience.[109] This 'audience reaction' track on the DVD of MACHETE clearly indicates a context that is different from the usual film viewing. Instead of silently disappearing into the story, the members of the audience loudly express their reactions by applauding or screaming. The spectacle practically expands from the screen to the auditorium. Hence, the collective experience of watching the film together is foregrounded. Although today the film MACHETE is not presented either in grindhouse or in Latino movie theaters, the soundtrack of audience reactions on the DVD suggests that viewers should not watch the film alone but rather in a collective as for the Mexican Formula Pictures.

When Rodriguez launched the film MACHETE, he deliberately emphasized its relevance to the current political situation and its potential explosiveness. On the Mexican holiday *Cinco de Mayo* (May 5th), Mexico celebrates its victory over the French; in the USA it has become an occasion to express Mexican national pride. Rodriguez chose this day to release a trailer in which the character *Machete* warns the U.S. state of Arizona that the

[109] The DVD lacks the usual extras such as a 'making of' segment or a version of the film with an audio commentary by the director.

new immigration policy will have bloody consequences. The trailer generated fiery debates, and conservative media even accused Rodriguez of trying to spark an ethnic war. The release strategy clearly suggests an appropriation involving empowerment and places the film within a contemporary political power construct.

Reception Modes

The aspects I have indicated so far — the formulaic narrative along with its variations and physical excesses; the viewing context, accompanied by side activities; the low-budget production mode; and the Latino director Rodriguez — all have an influence on the way spectators negotiate the meanings of the film MACHETE. For the *India María* films I have shown how the different reception modes come about due to the way different aspects are emphasized in the process. The film MACHETE can trigger a spectrum of readings. To conclude, I focus on two possible receptions. The first one emphasizes the diaspora identity. This reception could also be identified for the *India María* films and Mexican Formula Pictures more generally. A second reception focuses on the director and the American myth of upward mobility.

The first reception emphasizes the diaspora experience and might be triggered by a variety of different factors. First of all, the film offers an arsenal of positive Latino characters, including the hero of the film, *Machete*, but also the revolutionary *Luz* and the official in the immigration office. By treating the issues of migration, corruption, the border region and work, MACHETE deals with highly contemporary problems that are being heatedly discussed in the American and Mexican political arena. The film takes a clear stand, especially when the American immigration official mobilizes the migrants for battle with the slogan "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us!" This is a common saying used by Latinos, pointing out the war between the U.S. and Mexico and the subsequent shifting of national borders.

It was a coincidence that the immigration laws in Arizona were reformed and made stricter at about the same time as the film was launched. However, the explicit reference to this tightening of the law in a trailer specially made for the film puts it in the context of the discussion of U.S. immigration policy. Last but not least, the director Rodriguez himself encourages an analysis of the diaspora aspects of the film. Rodriguez embodies a Latino who has achieved success in the USA without denying his roots. By referring to the production mode of the Mexican Formula Picture — in formal terms as well as in the production process — Rodriguez helps to bring about a re-evaluation of the prevailing concepts of 'low-quality' films and 'bad taste' and lends these concepts a certain level of acceptance. The emphasis on the diaspora identity at all levels of film practice means that such a reception happens almost automatically or even becomes inevitable.

In addition, the film may encourage a second possible reception, although I believe this is a less important one. The spectators have the possibility of blocking out the diaspora aspects in their perception of the film. With a budget of $10 million for MACHETE, which is low compared to Hollywood productions, Rodriguez remains true to the low-budget production mode; he preserves the do-it-yourself attitude and positions himself once again as a rebel in the American film industry. Consequently, when spectators think of Rodriguez as a director and producer, they do not necessarily perceive him primarily as a Latino, primairily. Instead, his career and his present position in Hollywood can be interpreted as an example of the American success story — a version of the American parable of the dishwasher becoming a millionaire. Finally, viewers can always completely accept the formulaic narrative and enjoy the well-known story patterns.

In spite of the different aspects they accentuate, these receptions have elements in common. All of them focus on aspects of the border and throw them into question. Sometimes this happens at the level of the filmic structure — especially via the excessive way the body is presented as a spectacle. At other times it happens through the narrative, in that the formula of the fighter-adventure film is exaggerated. For example, in one of the first scenes of the film a Texas senator is hunting immigrants on the Mexican-U.S. border and brutally shoots down a pregnant woman and her husband — all while being filmed, for PR reasons. This can have a transgressing effect on the spectator. The combination of extreme violence and the presentation of the deformed bodies of migrant workers filmed with camera settings that are known from family films lead to a blurring of borders of genres. The fighter-adventure formula as well as the marked violence in the border region between Mexico and the USA is thus questioned in a fundamental way. But the blurring of borders goes beyond the content of the film. The film's viewing context and the production mode also break the rules and question norms by using reference frames that deviate from mainstream. The blurring of boundaries is further accompanied by a questioning of power structures. These factors must not necessarily induce a change in viewers' oppinions on migration, but neither do they basically exclude this possibility.

As I have outlined, Rodriguez' films and, most importantly, EL MARIACHI and MACHETE, bear numerous parallels to Mexican Formula Pictures in terms of their production, the way they refer to established story formulas, their character types, and their reception. Contrary to Mexican Formula Pictures, Rodriguez' films aim at a wide international audience and clearly have moved the Mexican Formula Pictures' 'style' into the international limelight, possibly even contributing to their re-evaluation as cultural products. However, Rodriguez' films remain an exception because of their widespread success with international audiences. The Mexican Formula Pictures analyzed in this study, in particular the films of *La India María*, have not reached comparable international success across language territories. Yet they will continue to

be watched by many Spanish speakers across the globe. I am also convinced that their position as cultural artifacts with a symbolic value is being constantly renegotiated. This dissertation will clearly do its part: It should be a beginning to research Mexican Formula Pictures more thouroughly.

Filmography

- A Day Without a Mexican (US, 2004) by Sergio Arau
- Aventurera / Adventuress (MX, 1949) by Alberto Gout
- ¡Ay María qué puntería! / Hey Maria What a Stupidity! (TV, MX, 1998) by María Elena Velasco
- Bellas de noches / Beauties of the Night (MX, 1974) by Manuel M. Delgado
- Born in East L.A. (US, 1987) by Cheech Marin
- Charlie's Angels (TV, US, 1976–1981) by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts
- Contrabando y traición / Contraband and Treachery (MX, 1976) by Arturo Martínez
- Desperado (US, 1995) by Robert Rodriguez
- Duro pero seguro / Hard but Sure (MX, 1975) by Fernando Cortés
- Eco Moda (TV, CO, 2001–2002) by Mario Ribero Ferreira
- El Chanfle (MX, 1979) by Enrique Segoviano
- El Chapulín Colorado / The Colored Grasshopper (TV, MX, 1973) by Enrique Segoviano
- El Chapulin Colorado 3D / The Colored Grasshopper 3D (MX, 2013) by Roberto Gómez
- El Chavo del Ocho / The BOy of the Eight (TV, MX, 1972–1992) hosted by *Televisa*
- El cielo dividido / Broken Sky (MX, 2006) by Julián Hernández
- El coyote emplumado / The Feathered Coyote (MX, 1983) by María Elena Velasco
- El Mariachi (MX/US, 1992) by Robert Rodriguez
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Illustration Index

Curriculum Vitae Seraina Rohrer
Date of birth: 19th of December 1977

Hönggerstrasse 5
8037 Zurich – Switzerland
seraina.rohrer@diskurs.ch

Education

10/2008 – 11/2012	**University of Zurich, Switzerland** **Ph.D. student in Film Studies, Prof. Margit Tröhler** ▪ Full research grants by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Research Council of the University of Zurich, the Peer Mentoring Project *Film Knowledge*, and the Graduate Program *GRAKO*
07/2009 – 07/2010	**University of California Los Angeles** **Visiting scholar at the Chicano Center, Prof. Chon Noriega** ▪ One-year research stay funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation
10/1999 – 05/2005	**University of Zurich** **M.A. in Film Studies & Communication** ▪ Tutor for classes of Prof. Vinzenz Hediger
1/1998	**Wetzikon High School, Switzerland, graduation** (best grades of class 1998)
6/1996	**Oak Ridge High School, Texas, graduation** (exchange year)

Languages

German: Mother tongue
English: Excellent oral and written knowledge (proficiency)
Spanish: Excellent oral and written knowledge
French: Excellent oral and written knowledge
Italian: Very good oral and written knowledge

Work Experience

Since 9/2013	**UBS Culture Foundation** **Member of the Board**
Since 8/2013	**NZZ am Sonntag** **Columnist «Hintergrund» (Background)**
Since 8/2011	**Solothurn Film Festival** **Director** ▪ Artistic and Managing Director of one the largest and most renown film festivals (2015: 50th Edition) in Switzerland, with 68,000 entries in seven days and guests from Switzerland and abroad. ▪ Jury member at various international festivals

01/2008 – 8/2011 **Zurich Film Commission**
Member of the Fiction Film Committee

05/2003 – 03/2009 **Locarno International Film Festival**
Head of Press Office

- International and Swiss communication strategies, collaboration with trade publications (Variety, Screen, etc.)

02/2006 – 05/2007 **Réseau Cinéma CH, University of Lausanne**
Head Coordinator of Master Graduate Programs

- Launching of four Swiss master graduate programs in collaboration with different universities, film schools, and the Swiss Film Archive.

Since 02/2003 **Freelance Journalist and Curator**

- For the publications **FACTS** and **DU**
- Programs: "México: cortos sin límites" at the **International Short Film Festival Winterthur**, "Provocation" at **Cabaret Voltaire,** etc.

12/2001 – 12/2002 **Colegio Humboldt, Puebla, Mexico**
Project Manager, Webpage Development

Selected Publications

Peer-reviewed journals:

Weder von hier noch von dort. Die Grenze USA-Mexiko, ein beliebter Schauplatz für Filme (Neither From Here nor From There: The US-Mexican Border as a Film Location). In: *Rosa*, Number 39, Fall 2009, 28–30.

Wie der Film Machete und der Rebell Robert Rodriguez ein exzessiv entgrenztes Publikum konstruieren (The Construction of an Excessive Audience in the Film Machete by Robert Rodriguez). In: Figurationen "Körpergrenzen", Volume 12, Number 2, 2011, 101–115.

Stereotyping in the Films of La India María. In: The Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies, Volume 3, Number 3, Spring 2009, 54–68.

Book:

Lektüre von Stop-Aids-Spots. Was Präventionskurzfilme bewirken können (Reading Stop Aids Spots. Possible Effects of Preventional Short Films). Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008.

Book chapters:

La India María – Das Spiel mit einer stereotypen (Helden)-Figur der mexikanischen Populärkultur (La India María – Playing with a Popular Mexican Hero). In: Robert Blanchet, Julia Zutavern et. al. (eds.): Serielle Formen. Marburg: Schüren, 2011.

Magischer Realismus im Film (Magical Realism in Film). In: Christen, Thomas; Blanchet, Robert (eds.): Einführung in die Filmgeschichte. New Hollywood bis Dogma 95. Marburg: Schüren, 2008, 229–248.

Press:

Revolution in 35mm (New Tendencies in Mexican Filmmaking). In: Du Kulturmagazin, Number 804, March 2010, 74–79.

Pour un cinéma Suisse qui sait souffler et prendre son temps (For a Swiss Cinema that Takes its Time). In: Le Temps, March 22, 2013.

Selection of Teaching Assignments

Public lectures (on academic topics):

Magical Realism in Film, University of Zurich, Switzerland, 5/5/2011

Mexican Formula Pictures: From Production to Reception, University of Zurich, Switzerland, 12/9/2010

Gender, Ethnicity, and Migration in Mexican Low-Budget Comedies, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany 12/2/2010

The Revolution in Mexican Cinema, Film Festival Pantalla Latina, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 11/22/2010

La India María y los discursos sobre fronteras, University of Guadalajara, México, 11/2009

B.A. courses:

Low-Budget Productions, University of Zurich, Switzerland (coming up in Spring Semester 2014)

Iconography of Filmic Landscapes, University of Zurich, Switzerland (Spring Semester 2009)

Popular Cinema in Latin America, University of Zurich, Switzerland (Fall Semester 2007)

An Introduction to Latin American Cinema, University of Zurich, Switzerland (Spring Semester 2006)